

Crisis Communication and Media Narratives: A Study of Dynamic Crisis Management in the U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Afghanistan

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Keywords: Crisis Communication, Public Crisis Management, Media Narratives Analysis.

Abstract: The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 sparked a global crisis of public perception, as chaotic evacuation scenes from Hamid Karzai International Airport were widely disseminated through international media, leading to intense criticism of U.S. crisis management. This study examines the public relations strategies adopted by the U.S. government in response to the crisis, focusing on media narratives and their role in shaping international discourse. By analyzing traditional and social media coverage, this research explores how different media platforms influenced public opinion and framed the withdrawal as either a strategic necessity or a policy failure. The study further develops a dynamic crisis communication framework, emphasizing the interaction between traditional media's structured narratives and social media's rapid information dissemination. Findings suggest that while traditional media provided in-depth analysis, social media amplified emotional reactions and real-time criticism, complicating crisis control efforts. This research contributes to the broader understanding of crisis communication in international relations, offering insights into how governments can better navigate high-profile crises in the digital age.

1 INTRODUCTION

On August 16, 2021, videos depicting the chaotic withdrawal of U.S. troops from Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, were widely disseminated across global online media. Among them, one particularly shocking video captured thousands of Afghans flooding the airport, with crowds surging onto the runway in a desperate attempt to board departing planes. As a U.S. C-17 transport aircraft was forced to take off, several Afghan civilians clung to the landing gear in a futile attempt to flee, ultimately falling from great heights to their deaths. Media reports indicate that between August 15 and 26, at least 200 people lost their lives due to the turmoil and violent attacks in and around the airport. The harrowing scenes quickly became a focal point of international discourse, triggering widespread criticism of the U.S. administration's handling of the withdrawal. Analysts widely attributed the chaos at the airport to a lack of planning and organizational oversight in the evacuation process, underscoring the significant shortcomings in crisis management. The tragic events not only elicited global sympathy for the Afghan people but also

prompted a broader reflection on the abrupt and disorderly nature of the U.S. military's departure.

The withdrawal from Afghanistan represents not only a pivotal moment in U.S. foreign policy but also a critical case of public opinion crisis with global ramifications. This is not the first instance in U.S. history where such events have occurred; the chaotic scenes at Kabul airport drew immediate parallels to the infamous "Saigon moment" of 1975, when the fall of Saigon marked the end of the Vietnam War. In both cases, the United States' national image and international reputation suffered severe short-term damage. However, the key question remains: how does a government respond to an image crisis of this scale, and what strategies can be employed to reconstruct its standing in the international community? Were the U.S. government's crisis communication efforts effective in mitigating reputational damage? What limitations emerged in managing the rapidly evolving international public discourse?

A particularly noteworthy aspect of this crisis is the role of social media in amplifying its impact. Unlike traditional media, social media platforms facilitated the instantaneous global dissemination of live footage, magnifying the crisis through viral circulation and networked interactions. This

unprecedented mode of communication has reshaped the structure of international public opinion and profoundly influenced public perceptions of the event. As a result, the interplay between traditional media and social media in shaping narratives surrounding the withdrawal warrants closer examination. How does social media influence public opinion through its dissemination mechanisms? Does traditional media still hold a dominant role in guiding international discourse? What are the similarities and differences in their narrative logic and influence strategies? These questions not only bear significant practical relevance but also contribute new academic insights into the study of crisis communication and international public opinion dynamics.

Using the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan as its focal point, this study employs process tracing to analyze the event's evolution, the crisis public relations strategies adopted, and their effectiveness. It further explores the role of media narratives in shaping public perception and international discourse. By conducting this analysis, the study seeks to illuminate the interaction mechanisms between traditional and social media in the communication of major international events, offering interdisciplinary theoretical contributions to the fields of crisis public relations and global public opinion research. Beyond examining the successes and failures of crisis response in this specific case, this study also aims to provide valuable insights for future strategies in managing international public opinion crises.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, crisis communication and media narratives have become pivotal areas of study within international communication and public relations. Benoit's (1995) Image Repair Theory offers a foundational framework for analyzing how individuals and organizations endeavor to restore their reputations following crises. This theory has been extensively applied in examining corporate and governmental crisis management strategies (Ulmer et al., 2014). Similarly, Coombs' (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) has gained prominence in analyzing diverse crisis communication strategies across complex international events (Coombs, 2007; Frandsen & Johansen, 2010). These theoretical perspectives are instrumental in evaluating the U.S. government's crisis response and its effectiveness in managing the

reputational damage associated with the Afghanistan withdrawal.

Crisis events significantly impact national image and international public opinion, with crisis communication strategies and media narratives playing crucial roles in shaping public perception and rebuilding international credibility. The increasing globalization and digitalization of information dissemination have further amplified the complexity and dynamism of crisis communication (Liu et al., 2011). Media serve as key intermediaries in transmitting and providing feedback on crisis-related information, exerting substantial influence over public discourse and collective attitudes. Entman's (1993) Framing Theory underscores how media outlets selectively present issues, employing specific narrative structures and affective cues to shape public understanding of events (Entman, 1993).

The rapid proliferation of social media has prompted scholars to explore the evolving roles of traditional and social media in crisis communication (Veil et al., 2011). Traditional media, known for their in-depth analysis and authoritative reporting, have historically played a dominant role in guiding public opinion during crises (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). In contrast, social media facilitate instantaneous information dissemination and interactive engagement among diverse user groups, thereby expanding the reach of crisis-related narratives and creating a more complex public opinion landscape (Jin et al., 2012). Despite this growing body of research, the interplay between traditional and social media in shaping international public discourse remains underexplored. Notably, there is a scarcity of systematic studies comparing the narrative frameworks and interaction mechanisms of these two media forms in crisis communication (Chouliaraki, 2006).

Another critical aspect of crisis public relations research is political image repair, which examines how governments and political entities rebuild their reputations following crises (Benoit, 1995; Ulmer et al., 2014). Existing studies have analyzed post-crisis image restoration strategies, focusing on public relations campaigns, media collaborations, and diplomatic efforts aimed at restoring international credibility (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010). For instance, Chouliaraki (2006) examined the role of media narratives in shaping public perceptions during crises, highlighting the importance of storytelling in image repair. Similarly, historical case studies of political crises offer valuable insights for understanding the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, unlike previous crises, the Afghanistan

withdrawal was characterized by the unprecedented influence of social media, which played a crucial role in shaping public discourse and amplifying the crisis on a global scale (Liu et al., 2011). This shift necessitates a reevaluation of traditional crisis communication theories, as they may no longer fully capture the evolving mechanisms of public opinion formation and image repair in the digital era (Veil et al., 2011).

In summary, a systematic examination of crisis public relations strategies and media narratives offers a deeper understanding of the complex mechanisms underlying crisis communication (Selnow & Seeger, 2013). Future research should further explore the interplay between traditional and social media in shaping public perception, while also identifying the synergies and limitations of multi-platform communication strategies (Jin et al., 2012). Such inquiries will provide both theoretical advancements and practical insights for enhancing dynamic crisis response mechanisms in an era of rapidly evolving media landscapes (Ulmer et al., 2014).

3 CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION: THE U.S. WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

In April 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden announced that his administration would adhere to the withdrawal agreement negotiated by the previous government, ensuring a complete military exit from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. Biden pledged that the process would be conducted in a safe, deliberate, and coordinated manner, reinforcing confidence in the military's capacity to manage the transition smoothly. In response to skepticism and public concern, U.S. officials justified the withdrawal as a necessary move to safeguard national interests, while reiterating their preparedness to counter any potential security threats.

However, in August 2021, the withdrawal took a drastic and chaotic turn, igniting a global media firestorm. On August 15, as the Taliban swiftly reclaimed Kabul, thousands of desperate Afghans rushed to Hamid Karzai International Airport in a frantic attempt to flee. The crisis reached a critical point when distressing footage of civilians clinging to a departing U.S. C-17 transport plane—some falling to their deaths—circulated widely, intensifying public outrage and raising concerns over the lack of U.S. preparedness and humanitarian oversight.

International media amplified criticisms of the U.S. government's failure to ensure a safe and organized evacuation, highlighting its strategic miscalculations and operational shortcomings.

Under mounting pressure, President Biden addressed the crisis, defending the withdrawal decision while acknowledging the unforeseen operational challenges. To counter escalating international criticism, the administration launched diplomatic efforts to reassure allies and justify the withdrawal as part of a broader strategic shift. Meanwhile, White House press secretaries and government media representatives emphasized U.S. assistance efforts during the evacuation, attempting to reframe the withdrawal as an effort to uphold global stability rather than a leadership failure.

The crisis further escalated on August 26, when a suicide bombing at the airport resulted in numerous casualties, including U.S. service members and Afghan civilians. This tragedy forced a shift in the government's crisis communication strategy, prompting the Biden administration to adopt a more conciliatory tone. The President offered explicit condolences, acknowledged failures in the evacuation process, and admitted that insufficient support had been provided to vulnerable Afghans. The administration initiated an internal review of the withdrawal's execution and proposed corrective measures. However, these responses had limited success in quelling public dissatisfaction or restoring confidence in U.S. crisis management.

By August 30, the final U.S. troops departed Afghanistan, officially marking the end of the withdrawal. As immediate media attention faded, public discourse shifted from crisis management to historical evaluation, sparking debates over the legacy of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. The Biden administration redirected its focus toward restoring the nation's international image, emphasizing post-withdrawal humanitarian aid for Afghan refugees and continued commitments to global security. Domestically, political narratives reframed the withdrawal as a necessary strategic decision, positioning it within the broader context of ending prolonged military engagements.

Despite these efforts, the long-term reputational impact of the withdrawal remains uncertain. While some media discussions acknowledge the inevitability and complexity of the U.S. exit, critical voices persist, questioning America's credibility, strategic foresight, and commitment to its allies. The Afghanistan withdrawal serves as a pivotal case in crisis communication, illustrating the challenges of balancing real-time crisis response, public perception

management, and long-term reputational repair in an era of instantaneous global media scrutiny.

4 MEDIA NARRATIVES AND PUBLIC OPINION IN THE U.S. WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 was not only a geopolitical event but also a crisis of public perception, shaped by the interplay between traditional and social media. These two media forms played distinct yet complementary roles in framing the withdrawal, influencing global reactions, and shaping the crisis communication strategies of the U.S. government. While traditional media provided structured, in-depth analyses with a focus on long-term geopolitical implications, social media accelerated the spread of real-time information, often amplifying emotional responses and public outrage. The interaction between these two media ecosystems highlights the complexities of crisis communication in an era where digital platforms dominate public discourse.

4.1 Traditional Media: Structured Analysis and Political Framing

Traditional media, particularly television news and print journalism, played a critical role in shaping global perceptions of the crisis. Major international outlets such as The New York Times (U.S.), The Guardian (UK), and Le Monde (France) adopted investigative and analytical approaches, reconstructing the withdrawal process while critically assessing its diplomatic, military, and geopolitical implications. Their coverage heavily focused on evaluating U.S. decision-making, identifying structural failures in evacuation planning, and drawing historical parallels—most notably comparing the Kabul withdrawal to the fall of Saigon in 1975.

Political framing was evident in traditional media narratives. U.S. Republican-aligned media and commentators used the crisis to attack the Biden administration, criticizing its lack of strategic foresight and execution failures. Meanwhile, European media framed the withdrawal as part of a broader decline in U.S. global influence, emphasizing the erosion of American credibility in international affairs. Despite these ideological biases, traditional media provided in-depth expert analysis, offering a

structured and multi-faceted perspective on the long-term implications of the withdrawal.

4.2 Social Media: Real-Time Dissemination and Emotional Amplification

Unlike traditional media, social media platforms such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, and YouTube played an immediate and emotionally charged role in shaping public discourse. Viral images and firsthand accounts of desperate Afghans clinging to U.S. planes intensified public outrage, framing the withdrawal as a humanitarian crisis rather than a strategic military decision. The rapid and decentralized nature of social media allowed for real-time information dissemination, making it a primary source for global audiences reacting to unfolding events.

However, the unregulated nature of social media also contributed to the spread of misinformation and emotionally driven narratives. Unlike traditional outlets that operate under editorial oversight and fact-checking mechanisms, social media lacks institutional gatekeeping, allowing unverified information and rumors to gain traction. As a result, public sentiment fluctuated rapidly, with digital platforms fostering discussions ranging from humanitarian concerns to critiques of U.S. leadership. Additionally, social media enabled affected individuals—such as Afghan civilians and military personnel—to share personal accounts in real time, increasing global pressure on the U.S. government to respond.

5 INTEGRATING TRADITIONAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Despite their differences, traditional and social media play complementary roles in crisis communication. Traditional media contribute credibility, in-depth reporting, and structured narratives that facilitate rational analysis, while social media accelerate information flows, amplify public sentiment, and mobilize global audiences. Given this dynamic interplay, effective crisis communication strategies must integrate both media types to ensure a balanced and coordinated response.

A fundamental component of crisis management is real-time monitoring of public opinion. Data-driven sentiment analysis across multiple platforms can help organizations identify emerging narratives and key

influencers shaping discourse. This allows for dynamic adjustments in communication strategies, preventing misinformation from escalating and enabling timely interventions.

Strategic utilization of multiple media platforms is essential. Traditional media should be leveraged for authoritative, rational discourse, while social media should be utilized for real-time engagement, transparency, and direct communication with the public. Ensuring consistency across platforms helps prevent contradictory narratives that could undermine credibility.

Furthermore, combating misinformation and managing public perception require clear and transparent messaging. Establishing a factual communication framework helps control the narrative and mitigate reputational risks. Engaging with international media fosters balanced coverage, reducing the risk of disproportionate reputational damage.

Long-term trust rebuilding necessitates proactive image repair strategies. Audience segmentation analysis can tailor messaging for different demographic groups, ensuring targeted outreach that resonates with specific concerns. Social media-driven initiatives, such as influencer collaborations and digital diplomacy, can reshape public perception and restore organizational credibility. Maintaining open communication channels before, during, and after crises fosters transparency, strengthening institutional resilience in the long run.

Finally, crisis preparedness is essential for minimizing reputational risks and ensuring swift, effective responses. Developing preemptive response frameworks enables organizations to make rapid, informed decisions while maintaining public trust. Post-crisis evaluations should assess communication effectiveness, providing insights for refining future crisis management approaches.

By adopting an integrated and adaptive crisis communication model, organizations can navigate crises more effectively, mitigate reputational harm, and restore public confidence in an era where digital media significantly influence global discourse.

6 CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan as a case study to explore the dynamic evolution of crisis public relations (PR) and image repair strategies. It examines the complementary roles of traditional and social media in crisis communication, highlighting their respective

strengths in information dissemination and reputation management. The findings emphasize that effective crisis PR requires a strategic integration of multiple media platforms, leveraging the credibility and analytical depth of traditional media while utilizing the immediacy and interactivity of social media to manage public sentiment and mitigate reputational damage.

However, this study has certain limitations. First, as it primarily relies on public media reports, it does not incorporate internal government decision-making processes, making it difficult to accurately assess the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies from an institutional perspective. Second, the analysis does not fully account for variations in international audience perceptions across different cultural contexts, which may lead to a biased understanding of global public opinion dynamics. Third, while the Afghanistan withdrawal had a significant short-term impact on the U.S. national image, its long-term consequences remain uncertain. The issue has been sporadically referenced in media discussions and diplomatic narratives, but a comprehensive assessment of its influence on U.S. foreign policy reputation and international public perception requires long-term observation and analysis.

Given these limitations, future research should focus on developing a dynamic crisis communication model that incorporates the evolving characteristics of social media engagement. Additionally, integrating artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, and historical PR case databases could enhance crisis response capabilities by enabling real-time sentiment analysis, predictive modeling, and rapid identification of optimal response strategies. By leveraging these technologies, future studies can provide a more systematic and data-driven approach to understanding the interplay between media narratives, crisis communication, and international reputation management.

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