

# Frame, Set, Match! Towards a model of successful crisis rhetoric

Public Relations Inquiry

2(1) 79–94

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DOI: 10.1177/2046147X12464205

pri.sagepub.com



**Lars W. Nord**

Mid Sweden University, Sweden

**Eva-Karin Olsson**

The Swedish National Defence College, Sweden

## Abstract

This article explores the mechanisms behind the ability of political leaders to win praise and support in times of crisis by studying one such case of crisis exploitation: the Swedish government's communication during the 2008 financial crisis. Looking back at the first term in office for the centre-right Alliance government, the government was initially struggling with historically low results in the regular opinion polls and a new electoral victory seemed to be beyond reach. However, this trend changed completely in the midst of the financial crisis when the government and its most prominent ministers from the dominant Moderate Party regained public support and confidence, and were able to win the next national election in 2010. The article argues that in order to explain successful political communication in times of crisis both the frames advocated by the political actors themselves and the media need to be taken into account. Based on this assumption the article proposes that successful political communication in crisis depends on a three-step process with interrelated aspects: the actor's ability for frame promotion, setting and matching. Frame selection here refers to actors' ability to use active frames (herein managerial, moral and responsibility frames), their ability to set the frame contexts so that they create a coherent logic resulting in frame reinforcement and, finally, their ability to match the political frames with the media's framing.

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## Corresponding author:

Eva-Karin Olsson, Swedish National Defence College, Försvarshögskolan, Stockholm, 11593, Sweden.

Email: [eva-karin.olsson@fhs.se](mailto:eva-karin.olsson@fhs.se)

**Keywords**

Crisis communication, financial crises, framing, political communication, strategic communication

**The story the media liked to tell**

Looking back at the first term in office for the Swedish centre-right Alliance government, 2006–2010, the government was initially struggling with historically low results in the regular opinion polls and a new electoral victory seemed to be beyond reach. This trend changed completely in the midst of the financial crisis in 2008, when the government and its most prominent ministers from the dominant Moderate Party regained public support and were able to win the next national election in autumn 2010. The Swedish Minister of Finance, Anders Borg, was praised for his handling of the crisis and in December 2008 he was deemed the most competent Swedish politician (*Svenska Dagbladet (SvD)*, 24 December 2008).<sup>1</sup> The case provides an illustrative example of how crises not only pose a threat to political actors but may also provide opportunities for strengthening organizational as well as personal credibility and legitimacy (Boin et al., 2009). From a crisis communication perspective, the notion of crisis as an opportunity raises questions about which communicative devices and techniques allow actors to exploit crisis situations. Turning to previous research on crisis communication, crises have foremost been seen as threats to organizational reputation and legitimacy, and actors' rhetorical strategies have in accordance been aimed at reducing blame.

In this article we argue that passive blame reducing strategies are not enough if one wants to understand the dynamics behind actors' strengthening of support in times of crises. Rather, these strategies ought to be complemented with more active managerial and morality frames. Frames need to be mutually reinforcing and matching with media logic dynamics. Hence the article aims to propose a model explaining successful crisis communication, defined as instances when political actors manage to exploit the crisis at hand, by focusing both on political actors' framing efforts and on favourable media coverage (Nord and Strömbäck, 2006). In doing so we highlight the role of the media in connection to crisis communication, which has so far received limited attention within the crisis communication literature (An, 2011; Bligh et al., 2004; Hallahan, 1999; Ihlen and Nitz, 2008; Masters and 't Hart, 2012; Schultz and Raupp, 2010; Viorela and Ihlen, 2011). The model has been inductively derived from an exploratory case study based on the Swedish government's response to the financial crisis in 2008. The model, which is explained in the next section consists of three basic steps; (1) the selection of frames; (2) the reinforcement of frames involved in the total frame setting; (3) the matching of frames with the media logic.

The article has been structured as follows: we start with a literature review on crisis rhetoric and media logic, ending with the proposed model for explaining successful crisis communication. The empirical section shows the result of the study by accounting for the three inductively derived frames (responsibility, managerial and morality).

The frames will be further analysed and discussed in connection to frame reinforcement and media logic matching.

## **Crisis rhetoric and media logic**

Crisis communication research has dealt with how crisis managers evade blame by applying appropriate rhetorical strategies such as denial, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification (Benoit, 1995). The notion of image repair strategies was originally launched by Benoit (1995) and has been further developed into for example Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 1995, 2004; Coombs and Holladay, 1996, 2002). The majority of studies within this strand of research have been focused on corporate actors. However, the same preoccupation with blame games can be seen in the more political oriented crisis communication literature the rather limited amount of political crisis communication research is along the same lines in focusing on political blame-games (Benoit and Henson, 2009; Brändström and Kuipers, 2003; Boin et al., 2009; Boin et al., 2010). This holds true for research focusing on the acute crisis phase, whereas scholars with an interest in the crisis recovery phase also have highlighted rhetorical strategies aimed at comforting victims and organizational members (Griffin-Padgett and Allison, 2010; Seeger and Griffin Padgett, 2010; Seeger and Ulmer, 2001; Ulmer et al., 2006). According to previous research the most important aspect determining actors' ability to avoid blame is the framing of crisis causes. Causes could be either exogenous (located outside the realm of the responsible actors) or endogenous (responsible actors are the very source of the problem). By framing crises as exogenous it becomes easier for political actors to make authoritative statements and to remain in control of the information flow, whereas events framed as endogenous risk undermining confidence in actors and open up for criticism (Boin et al., 2009). The framing of crisis causes is thus, at least to a certain extent, constrained by the nature of the crisis at hand. For example, wars are more easily framed as exogenous, caused by outside enemies, than compounded crises, such as financial or ecological crises, which because of their complexity are more open to various framing efforts (Edelman, 1988). In line with this, cross-national research on the 2008 financial crisis found allocation of blame and responsibility for the crisis to vary across selected countries ('t Hart and Tindall, 2009).

The focus on blame rhetoric is closely connected to the notion of crises as threats. Hence crises do not only represent a threat but also an opportunity where successful outcomes boost political parties and individual carriers (Boin et al., 2009). Successful crisis communication is, then, as much about coming out unscathed from crises as being able to use the situation to show action and to push through pet policies. In this article we argue that actors who manage to exploit crises cannot rely solely upon rhetoric addressing responsibility issues, but ought to combine these with more active frames related to promoting their own management as well as societal values in order to connect with their audiences. Further, these frames ought to match with the logic of the media.

The concept of framing has been one of the most influential ways of understanding communication during the last decades (Entman, 2003; Goffman, 1974; Graber, 1993; Iyenger, 1993; Vliegenthart and van Zoonen, 2011). The power of frames lies in their

ability to categorize and connect bits of information and by doing so reduce complexity into single coherent stories yet carrying ideological and political implications (Gamson, 1992). Framing, then, becomes an ideological strategic battle where actors fight over the legitimacy of values and principles (Canel, 2012; Entman, 2003; Pan and Kosicki, 2003). Hence, Framing is understood as an essential feature of news media characteristics because it shapes the ways issues are reported on and, in doing so, influences audience perception (Barker, 2005; Borah, 2011; Shen and Edwards, 2005). As expressed by Van Gorp (2007) 'there is interaction between the journalist's (un)conscious selection of a frame – out of the cultural stock of frames – as the result of the individual belief system, and the influence of additional factors inside and outside the media organizations' (2007: 67).

Another way of approaching news media framing is through the concept of 'media logic'. Media logic is in general seen as the driving force in the process of mediatization of politics and involves a series of effects such as dramatization and personalization of news. One distinctive feature of this development is the media's tendency to avoid complexity by focusing on political actions and political leadership (Altheide and Snow, 1979; Mazzoleni and Schultz, 1999). As a result, one of the most commonly applied frames in political news reporting is the *strategic game* frame, which portrays politics as a game with winners and losers at the expense of substantial policy issues (for an overview see Aalberg et al., 2011; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). Further, the media tends to bias news by giving more space and favourable treatment to candidates that are popular and powerful, or perceived as such, than to their counterparts (Entman, 2010; Gans, 1979; Wolfsfeld, 1997). Other common ways of framing politics are through conflict, morality, human interest, economic consequence and responsibility frames (Gamson, 1992; Gerhards and Rucht, 1992; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000; Valkenburg et al., 1999). The responsibility frame has been found to be the predominantly applied frame in crisis coverage (An and Gower, 2009). As previously mentioned, frames ought to be culturally grounded, which results in news being made up by instances of culturally resonant symbols that are easily recognized and understood by the audience (what Entman (2010) refers to as *stereotyped novelty*). According to Lule (2001) there are seven such universal symbols, or myths, centred on eternal stories of blame, heroism and faith, which serve as the mythological backbone of journalistic storytelling.<sup>2</sup> The mythological character of news places morality at the very core of journalistic activities, enabling audiences to build and maintain a psychological link to places and actors reported on (Silverstone, 2006).

In order to improve the understanding of successful crisis communication we propose a model which brings together the notions of framing and media logic. The model consists of the following three steps: we argue that the interactions between the concepts of framing and media logic need to be further analysed, and we propose a model for such analysis in three steps: the selection of certain frames; the reinforcement of frames involved in the total frame setting; and their matching with the media logic. The first step focuses on the frames promoted by political actors. The second step focuses on how the selected frames are settled in order to mutually reinforce each other in creating an even more powerful message. The third step relates to the mediatization of political communication and the media's power to support certain actors' frames while portraying others

as less compelling (Gurevitch and Levy, 1985:19; Mazzoleni and Schultz, 1999). With regard to the financial crisis, in general, the selection of frames and the way they were put together corresponded with the media logic in managing to reduce the complexity of the crisis to a simplified compelling story without contradictions. In the next section, the three-step model of analysis will be used for the study of the Swedish government's response to the financial crisis.

## The case of Sweden

In applying the crisis definition to the financial turmoil of 2008 it can be argued that the situation posed a grave threat to the overall global financial system as well as to the welfare of single states. Due to the high stakes at play, the crisis posed a threat to governments' ability to handle the situation. Further, especially the first period of the crisis was characterized by extensive uncertainty caused by the collapse of large financial institutions, bailouts of national banks and significant downturns in stock markets. In order to get a grasp of the problem and to stabilize the system, swift action was demanded. It should be noted that Sweden remained outside the worst turbulence. Yet the Swedish stock market fell by 40 percent in 2008, and during the last quarter of 2008 gross national product (GNP) was 4.9 percent lower than the same quarter in 2007. Altogether, Swedish GNP went down 0.2 percent in 2008, which was far lower than the predictions made at the beginning of the year (Statistiska centralbyrån, 2009).

The objective of the study was to test whether the proposed three-step model could be applied in the analysis of the Swedish government's communication during the 2008 financial crisis. The empirical material of the study consisted of media reports in the four leading national daily newspapers in Sweden in the period 1 September–31 October 2008. All news articles including the phrases 'financial crisis' and 'economic crisis' were analysed by qualitative text analysis. The newspapers included in the study were the up-market tabloids *Aftonbladet* (*AB*) and *Expressen* (*Exp*), and the morning papers *Dagens Nyheter* (*DN*) and *Svenska Dagbladet* (*SvD*), all based in Stockholm. The news items were collected through the web search engine Retriever. In total 680 news articles were included in the sample.

In the text analysis, frames were distinguished through an inductive study guided by Entman's (1993: 52) suggestion that frames can be examined and identified by 'the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments'. Guided by Entman's definition, we categorized the empirical material into frames, eventually ending up with three such frames: responsibility, managerial management and morality. The results presented in the following section are typical and illustrative examples of frames found in the total sample of news articles.

## Responsibility frames

The main theme in the rhetoric of the Swedish government with regard to the roots of the problem was to consistently refer to the financial crisis as an exogenous phenomenon,

The Minister of Finance described a system where sneaky bankers on Wall Street had created systems of reimbursements to themselves and, as an effect happened to bring down the whole industrialized world. (*AB*, 10 July 2008)

Many statements from the government during the initial phases of the crisis also confirmed an awareness of the increased insecurity in the global economy. But even if the consequences of the crisis were described as general in scope, the origins of the problems were explained as an American 'disease', where American banks and financial institutions were under market heavy pressure.

According to this frame of the problem, the government pointed to the collapse of the American housing market and the problems for credit institutions and investment banks in the US. This interpretation of the events was successfully disseminated to the press:

It is definitely so that the global economy, including Sweden and Europe, is influenced by crude greed and irresponsible risk-taking, above all in American banks, says Minister of Finance, Anders Borg. (*DN*, 1 October 2008)

During the continued phases of the crisis the Minister of Finance pointed out that Sweden was among the very first countries within the European Union (EU) to handle the situation by stabilizing the financial conditions. The problems were caused by failures in the American economy, but thanks to European strategies to stabilize the economy, prospects were now better. In the press, the Minister of Finance and his EU colleagues appeared as effective troubleshooters:

The crisis started in the US and Anders Borg was critical of the American way of handling the crisis: 'It was a school book example of what not to do. The USA tried to solve the problem case by case, and had problems to decide about a package, but has now retreated to the European model, which is completely right', according to Borg. (*SvD*, 30 October 2008)

To conclude, the Swedish newspapers consequently framed the financial crisis as an exogenous phenomenon, and representatives of the Swedish government were mainly portrayed as victims of economic mismanagement abroad. Still, they were characterized as having better knowledge and skills than their foreign counterparts. As noted in the literature section, responsibility frames are one of the most commonly applied frames in political news reporting. In this case, the government successfully managed to frame the crisis as exogenous, which made it fit with the managerial and morality frame.

## Managerial frames

The leading crisis management theme intensively orchestrated by the government was that Sweden managed the financial crisis better than most other countries. The common story told was that the government was efficiently supervising the developments in close cooperation with other central governmental authorities, such as the Central Bank of

Sweden. The government repeatedly claimed to have full control of the situation, even if the crisis undoubtedly was moving closer to Sweden.

The global financial system was seriously affected, but the financial stability in Sweden was still 'satisfactory'. 'The house is in order', was one leading message. The Minister of Finance was portrayed in the press as a very competent member of the government, and a 'strong supporter of the concept of sound state finances with some surpluses' (*SvD*, 29 September 2008).

In an article with the headline 'Anders Borg gets across in Germany' the Minister of Finance was described as something of a national hero, deciding on a giant rescue package for the Swedish banks in the morning, and then speaking to the prestigious market liberal German think tank INSM in Berlin the same afternoon. According to the article, the '40 year old Swede with earring and pony tail' charmed the qualified audience with his sound economic advice:

'Smart guy', said one Senior Editor at a leading German newspapers. (*DN*, 21 October 2008)

The intelligence of Anders Borg was to a large extent expressed in the Swedish press coverage and mainly so in news articles describing him as a responsible politician with a long-term perspective on the economic development in Sweden:

Anders Borg assures that he has control over the economic situation and rejects proposals to spend 50 billion SEK on reforms. 'I am not taking any risks leading us into the mess of the financial markets. We will defend our security by having a surplus when economic growth declines.' (*SvD*, 23 September 2008)

At the same time, the government warned that the situation could deteriorate at any moment, with huge impacts on the Swedish economy. The globalization of the economy and financial markets meant that no single country could escape the crisis.

The situation was referred to in Sweden as 'the toughest in the world economy in three decades' and emphasized that this would have an affect on the Swedish economy. 'We are not out of the tunnel yet,' Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt declared to the press after one month of market worries (*AB*, 17 October 2008). Backwashes from the 'financial tsunami' would also reach Sweden, as the government framed the situation. The press noticed that the Minister of Finance's use of weather metaphors changed from time to time:

Anders Borg sounded a bit more worried than before. The 'dark clouds' previously symbolizing the economic situation were replaced by 'an autumn storm affecting the world economy'. (*SvD*, 23 September 2008)

One important aspect of the control message was the extensive use of metaphors, and in particular weather metaphors, in playing up the severity of the crisis, probably as a way of lowering expectations for the government's management abilities. This part of the managerial frame relates to the art of expectation management where leaders have basically two choices: either to downplay or upgrade the severity of the situation at



hand. In a study on the Singaporean government's response to the SARS crisis in 2003, Jin et al. (2006) conclude that the government in general regarded the crisis to be more severe than the public did as a way of emphasizing the government's handling of it. Thus, upgrading crisis severity can also function as a way of downplaying public expectations on the government's ability to handle it. In the Swedish case, upgrading the severity of the situation complemented the in-control message frame by contrasting it to a not-in-control message frame that related in relation to the actual situation and its development of the situation at the international stage abroad. To upgrade crisis severity might well also provide an impression of being an honest teller of grim facts rather than unrealistic rosy scenarios. According to a governmental representative, the Swedish government worked extensively with finding metaphors to describe the situation used various communication strategies during the financial crisis:

We devoted a considerable amount of time finding good metaphors to describe the economic development. At last we decided to go for the weather metaphors, which everyone understands. Anders Borg had to talk about dark clouds gathering on the horizon etc. Weather metaphors are good, they span over the whole spectra from good to bad times (governmental representative quoted in Hallvarsson & Halvarsson, 2010: 73).

The use of vivid metaphors then fitted well with the news media language and need for dramatization.

In most articles covering the crisis, the Minister of Finance was associated both with a deep awareness of the problems ahead and with a decisive approach to handling these problems. He was obviously not the worrying kind of man:

Minister of Finance, Anders Borg, declares that the situation is serious, but that the government has full control over the situation ... 'I have been sleeping tight tonight, that is the most important ... We have preparedness to act and we are following the developments carefully', says Anders Borg. (*DN*, 7 October 2008)

On the whole, the Minister of Finance was positively framed in the press with regard to his crisis management, and some news analyses conclude that the government thanks to him would probably come out of the crisis strengthened.

When a foreign crisis faces Sweden the government has the upper hand. The citizens like to see someone in charge of crisis management and as long as the government seems to be in charge it can expect further public support. And Anders Borg has been clever. (*Exp*, 7 October 2008)

To sum up, the Swedish government's frames of competence and successful management were to a large extent present in the press coverage, and must be considered generally favourable for the government. In relation to the dynamics of the media logic, the managerial frame was reinforced by the media creating a positive spiral; that is, the more the coverage portrayed the government, and especially the Finance Minister, as being powerful and popular, the more positive the coverage.



## Morality frames

In trying to create a public acceptance of the crisis situation, and facilitate understanding of the measures that had to be taken, the government consistently contrasted the diverging interests of the private banks and ordinary citizens. In this case the frame clearly singled out the banks as being the bad guys, which only acted out of self-interest and let ordinary people pay for their excesses. Even though this frame resembles a blame framing of the event the difference is that the Swedish banks were not the actual cause of the problem, and therefore the frame has more to do with communicating values and ethics. In doing so, the government successfully managed to identify itself with ordinary people in acting as the defender of their interests against greedy banks. According to governmental representatives the strategy of portraying the banks as the bad guys was a deliberate communicative strategy (even though they underline that the concern was genuine). 'This [the bank strategy] made a nice fit with the media logic even though it became somewhat over used' (Hallvarson & Halvarsson, 2010: 73). The banks were described as less responsible institutions with too little interest in the common good, while the citizens were regularly referred to as helpless victims. Against this backdrop, the government's actions were necessary in punishing the reckless gamblers while protecting the interests of ordinary people:

The Minister of Finance will stop extra bonuses to bank managers. 'Their driving force should not be to take too big risks with other peoples' money', says Anders Borg. (*AB*, 8 October 2008)

Accordingly, the Minister of Finance repeatedly declared that he demanded something back from the banks in return for further economic guarantees from the state:

The state is creating emergency funds and economic guarantees in order to stop the current confidence crisis affecting the banks. But Minister of Finance Anders Borg will for many years demand huge amounts of money, in form of fees, from the bank managers. (*SvD*, 22 October 2008)

Anders Borg was particularly critical of extra bonuses to bank managers and demanded they were cancelled. The argument was that if bank managers were economically encouraged and rewarded by taking big risks, they would take such risks. This was a danger for the stability on the financial markets. Thus, the amount of the bonuses and the reimbursements was not just an issue for the companies involved. Borg would not deal with the banks without getting anything back, reported the press, quoting the Minister as saying:

If Swedish banks get problems and come to me and ask for state support I will ask them to leave their shares at the same time. They will not receive a single penny crown from me without discussions on linking this to the ownership. (*SvD*, 29 September 2008)

The criticism of private bank managers for their selfish behaviour was prevalent throughout the financial crisis, and was often contrasted with the government caring for ordinary tax-paying Swedish citizens with regular incomes. They should not be the losers of the crisis:

'To reset the confidence for the system and to guarantee that the Swedish taxpayers will not be left with the bill, we have developed a stability plan,' says Anders Borg. (*SvD*, 21 October 2008)

The use of vivid language and metaphors can be seen also in this frame where, for example, Anders Borg coined the expression 'put a halter on greed' in order to explain the role of the government in connection to the banks. The expression was taken up by the Prime Minister when he was asked to comment on the role of politicians in the crisis:

A market economy requires regulations. Not too extensive because that will damage business creativity but not too little either because that will lead to other forces taking over. As stressed by the Minister of Finance Anders Borg, greed is something that one has to put a halter on. (*DN*, 12 October 2008)

Again, we can see how the government managed to launch expressions and metaphors that were picked up by the press.

The interests of the common taxpayers were not only referred to in the domestic debate, but were also the usual argument when the Minister of Finance commented on the international situation and the failures of other countries in dealing with the crisis:

Swedish taxpayers will not accept paying for other countries trespasses,' says Anders Borg. (*SvD*, 4 October 2008)

Besides picking the 'good and the bad guys' in the crisis, the government also wanted to stand out as a symbol of national unification in order to deal with the external threat. Thus, previous policy controversies with political rivals were downplayed by the ruling parties, as they would like to be perceived as responsible and open-minded. The sudden change in the political agenda was noted by press commentators, but was not described as anything negative:

This time the political opposition was invited, but neither Anders Borg nor Fredrik Reinfeldt mentioned their previous resistance towards broader political discussions. Now they underlined the importance of consensus in a crisis situation. (*SvD*, 14 October 2008)

In the press, the government and the Minister of Finance were portrayed as responsible and moral compared to other actors during the crisis. The heavy attacks on bank managers were especially commented upon, as the rhetoric used was surprisingly tough coming from the political right wing. By avoiding the usual struggle with the opposition parties on economic issues the government also looked appeared cooperative and rational. According to government representatives, the main advantage of their communicative strategy was that they managed to 'formulate its strategy in accordance to ancient classical narratives centred around victims and heroes that have become a fundamental part of human thinking: here are the victims, white knights, and the black. It was tailor made for the media' (Hallvarsson & Halvarson, 2010: 72). In sum, the government came out as the

hero standing up against powerful and greedy elites and in doing so protecting the interests of ordinary citizens.

## **A model for successful crisis communication**

In the last and concluding section we will discuss the findings above in relation to the model proposed here. Based on the empirical study, we argue that the Swedish government managed to turn public opinion to its advantage based on the selection and promotion of certain frames, the reinforcement of frames involved in the total frame setting and their matching with the media logic.

The first aspect relates to which frames to promote in order to gain support for the crisis management. In the study at hand, we found responsibility frames to be important; however, the frame was complemented by more active frames such as managerial and moral frames with the ability to promote crisis management actors on a personal basis as well as to create a connection with the experiences and life worlds of fellow citizens by emphasizing joint moral grounds. The responsibility framing follows previous research in confirming that actors prefer exogenous crisis causal frames because these allow actors to locate blame outside their own realm. In this case the crisis was depicted as originating in the USA and explained as an 'American disease'.

Turning to the managerial frame, it promoted the government as a competent crisis manager by emphasizing its ability to keep the 'house in order'. Another important aspect of the managerial frame involved was the art of 'expectation management'. The study shows how the Swedish government worked with various weather metaphors in up-playing crisis severity playing up the severity of the crisis and in doing so as a way of lowering expectations on of their management capabilities. The upgrading of crisis severity also worked in creating an impression of the government as being an honest teller of grim facts in contrast to someone painting unrealistically rosy scenarios. The third characteristic of the managerial frame was the portraying of Anders Borg as both intelligent and competent, which was further strengthened by references to how appreciated he was amongst his European colleagues.

Finally, the morality frame focuses on morals, emotions and values. In this case the frame clearly singled out the banks as being the bad guys, who only acted out of self-interest and let ordinary people pay for their excesses. In doing so, the government successfully managed to identify itself with ordinary people in acting as the defender of their interests against greedy banks. Besides the heavy criticism of the banking sector the government also promoted itself as a symbol of national unification by engaging the opposition in a quest for political consensus across party lines. This rhetorical move underlined the severity of the situation and positioned the government as taking up its moral responsibility by putting aside party politics and self-interest.

Examining the second step in the analysis, the study demonstrated several examples of successful frame reinforcement. First, the framing of the crisis as exogenous made it possible for the Swedish government to portray itself as the victim of others' mismanagement. The main focus of the responsibility frame was then not to assign blame but rather to promote the government's, and its European counterparts', management of the crisis. The framing of the crisis as exogenous also facilitated the government's efforts to deliver

its main message – ‘the house is in order’ – as an important aspect of the managerial frame. The in-control message was somewhat paradoxically mixed with the government’s expectation management in upgrading severity. For example, through its extensive use of weather metaphors, the government downplayed its ability to control developments and opened up the possibility for the situation to get even worse. However, this strategy is only an option at times when a crisis has already been framed as having exogenous causes. The in-control message was further supported by the press emphasizing the competence of the government and in particular the Minister of Finance, Anders Borg. Overall, the press portrayed the minister as highly competent, for example by referring to how well perceived he is amongst his European colleagues. The depicting of the Finance Minister as a competent and well respected politician created confidence in the measures proposed by the government and gave overall credibility to its management of the crisis. Credibility was further strengthened by the government not only being depicted as competent but also as a moral actor defending the interest of ordinary citizens against powerful actors in the financial sector – especially the bankers. The government’s framing of the crisis was very much in line with previous research on political leadership and communication stating that leaders who manage to display a sense of power and confidence as well as referring to community values such as moral justifications are more successful in their communication than their counterparts (Shamir et al., 1993; Walter and Bruch, 2009). The government then managed to legitimize its measures, not only by rational motives, which were the basis for the managerial frame, but also by evoking value based arguments with strong emotional undertones.

The final component in the framework, frame matching, focuses on the correspondence between frames and media logic. In terms of responsibility the government was successfully framing the crisis as having exogenous causes. By getting off the responsibility hook, the managerial and morality frames were receiving more media attention. The managerial frame portrayed the government, and especially the Minister of Finance, as competent and clever. This was, for example, done by references to internal experts praising the Minister of Finance as well as by references to opinion polls. In line with previous research, the coverage became reinforcing in continuing to focus on his popularity and competence while ignoring critical scrutiny and remarks (Entman, 2010). As discussed previously, the managerial frame fitted well into the morality frame, which also matched with the media logic and its tendency to focus on mythical stereotypes. The public relations strategy of blaming the banks matched a classical rhetorical technique playing out old myths of victims and heroes, which make for good news stories. Further supporting the media logic was the frequent use of metaphors and vivid language used by the government, which became integrated into the media coverage. This is in line with previous research, arguing that political leaders who use vivid and image-based language compelling to emotions rather than intellectual arguments, tend to be more effective communicators than their counterparts (Emrich, et al., 2001).

To conclude, the main purpose of this article was to test an analytical model in order to improve understanding of successful crisis exploitation in mediated contexts. In contrast to the main bulk of crisis communication research, the model emphasizes the importance of, managerial and morality, in contrast to more passive blame avoidance frames. Further, the model highlights the role of the media in the process in arguing that frames

ought to be in line with media logic dynamics in order to become successful. However, it should be noted that the model is derived through an explorative case study, which makes the empirical sample limited. Thus, in order to increase knowledge on crisis exploitation and the interplay between framing and media logic, additional research is needed exploring various types of crises in different political and national contexts.

## Funding

This research was supported by a grant from MSB (Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency) and from Cooperation Area Economic Security (CAES).

## Notes

- 1 According to an opinion poll by SIFO/SvD end of December 2008, 51 percent of the respondents believed Anders Borg to have the best abilities to lead Sweden out of the financial crisis in contrast to his main opponent, the Social Democratic spokesperson on financial matters, Thomas Östros, who got 22 percent (27 percent answered that they did not know) (SvD, 24 December 2008).
- 2 According to Lule (2001) the seven myths are the following: the victim, the scapegoat, the hero, the good mother, the trickster, the other world and the flood.

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## Author biographies

Lars W. Nord is Professor and Chair of Political Communication at Mid Sweden University and Director of The Centre for Democracy and Communication. He holds a PhD in Journalism from the University of Stockholm (2001). His research interests include crisis communication, political journalism, media systems and strategic political communication. He is currently heading a research project on crisis communication dynamics during the financial crisis, financed by The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency. His previous work in the area of crisis communication



includes studies of the tsunami disaster in 2004, the wars in Iraq in 2003 and Afghanistan in 2001 as well as the 9/11 terror attacks in 2001. His work is published in journals such as *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *Communication, Culture & Critique* and *European Journal of Communication*.

Eva-Karin Olsson is Assistant professor at Crismart (Crisis Management Research and Training) at The Swedish National Defence College. She holds a PhD from the Department of Journalism, Media and Communication at Stockholm University. Her research interests are centred on crisis management and communication. Recent work focuses on issues related to political communication and management in transboundary crises. From 2011 to 2013 Olsson is project leader and researcher for the project Transboundary Crisis Communication funded by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency. She has published her work in journals such as *Journalism*, *International Journal of Press/Politics* and *Journalism Practice*, and *Public Administration*.