

Final Paper - Puerto Rico: Hurricane Maria

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“We’re American too, why don’t they help?” For the first time in 85 years, Puerto Rico was reeling with devastation after being directly struck by category 4 hurricane Maria. The hurricane made landfall onto the island on September 20, 2017 changing the lives of over 3 million American citizens who resided there. The damages would end up amounting to over \$96.7 billion which is the most damage Puerto Rico has experienced to this day in terms of capital. The hurricane knocked out power throughout the whole island and this took several months to restore. Eleven months after the hurricane struck Puerto Rico, the World Vision Organization reported that although 96% of the island’s power had been restored, roughly 62,000 residents were still out of electricity. The entire island would experience a complete blackout.

Unfortunately, the hurricane didn’t just cause damage to the country's electrical structure, it was also responsible for a total of 3,095 fatalities. In a country where 44% of its population, pre-hurricane, were experiencing poverty, this widened the gap for self-sufficiency capabilities.

Puerto Rico was in dire need of support and as a territory of the United States, they turned to its government for a helping hand. Unfortunately for Puerto Rico, the United States federal response was brimming with unenthusiastic efforts that ultimately increased the number of issues they would have to deal with. This occurred during the Trump presidency and instead of focusing on getting the residents viable assistance, he insisted on engaging in repairing his already tampered image by responding to criticism made by San Juan Puerto Rico’s mayor at the time, Carmen Yulin Cruz among others. At one point, he took a trip to the island and images captured during his visit would become a negative highlight in the United State’s already insensitive response. Not long after his arrival in Puerto Rico a video began circulating social media platforms where he’s seen tossing paper towels into a crowd as if they were free gifts at a

sporting event. This was a group of Puerto Rican residents inside a facility waiting to be provided with basic supplies, but Trump decided to make light of the situation. Individuals were visibly upset and considering the hurricane that was just endured, they were justified.

Aside from Trump's public relations failed campaign to try and convince the media that he was empathetic to the situation, FEMA released a report that concluded that there were major failures in their response to hurricane Maria as well. The oversight included but was not limited to a lack of qualified personnel in charge of leading the efforts, shipping and delivery obstacles, inefficient distribution of emergency supplies and overall negligence.

Exploring the United States Response

Nearly a year after hurricane Maria, a poll showed that "Puerto Ricans sharply rebuke President Trump, along with the federal and local governments, for last year's response to Hurricane Maria, a devastating storm that created an enduring humanitarian crisis affecting nearly all aspects of life on the island territory." (Clement, S. et al).

When the hurricane hit initially, the response by the federal government was one of the largest in terms of capital – at least on paper. While there was an almost immediate response to the crisis, there's evidence reported showing that Trump's administration delayed nearly \$20bn for hurricane aid for 3 years. In September of 2020, the White House put out a press release titled "President Donald J. Trump is Supporting the People of Puerto Rico as They Continue to Rebuild Following Natural Disasters." In this press release they detailed the amount of money Puerto Rico would be receiving to help rebuild their infrastructure, provide disaster relief, and general recovery support. While this is great, there were statements within the release that called out that the funding "...vastly exceeded Puerto Rico's annual government budget of approximately \$9 billion" which dismisses the fact that the people of Puerto Rico did not ask for

such a disaster to occur. (trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov). This further proves the notion that the visit to Puerto Rico was merely a press tour to attempt to drive positive PR for Trump. It's no surprise as many of his actions during his presidency were combinations of failed attempts to be popular among the people he continuously made negative remarks about.

A vital part of the White House responses are the actions taken by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). "The scale of the destruction resulted in the longest sustained air mission of food and water delivery in FEMA history" states the FEMA site in which they reflect on 2017 storms, one of which was hurricane Maria. This reflection happened in 2020 and failed to acknowledge reports released in 2018 that exposed the lack of preparedness in Puerto Rico's emergency supply warehouses. When the hurricane made landfall the warehouses were already running low on things like tarps and cots. In addition to lack of inventory, FEMA themselves had been experiencing operational issues where they were understaffed during the hurricane season. The hurricane managed to knock out power in 95% of the island and unfortunately this caused issues with communication among those agents deployed on the island because FEMA did not have enough satellite phones working at the time either.

Communication issues were atrocious to the point where items being shipped to the island for relief were untrackable and overall there was no visibility into what was being shipped to Puerto Rico from the US, other countries and private parties. Incoming supplies were not clearly labeled and agents found themselves having to unpack and unload containers to determine their contents. Overall FEMA determined that they underestimated the true magnitude of requirements necessary to provide viable assistance.

Crisis Theory/Theories Utilized

For starters one of the crisis theories that is applied, well lack of, would be theories of warning. It was stated that on September 13th, seven days before, that a tropical storm was building up and was going to continue to grow. Then on September 17th, three days before the hurricane was scheduled to hit in the afternoon it was said that the storm had reached 75-mile-per-hour wind speeds officially making it a hurricane at that point and no longer a storm. (Meyer, 2017) With this type of knowledge and the time it was learned an evacuation plan should have been used to ensure those that can move to safety were allowed to and should evacuate as quickly as possible. Theories of Warning are “communication strategies that are implemented to mitigate harm in both pre and post crisis phases.”(Lachlan, et al. 2020, pg18), which they lacked seeing that the damage was tremendous leaving over three-thousand dead and over sixty-thousand without power for about a year. Another crisis theory that is here is image repair theory; “Image repair theory focuses on the persuasive strategies that people and organizations engage in to repair a damaged or threatened image.” (Lachlan, et al. 2020, pg32). We see it here when at the time of this crisis President Trump went directly to addressing comments and criticism instead of focusing on speaking about getting assistance to Puerto Rico in their time of need. This moment was perfect for former president trump to repair his image and in return he failed making himself look worse. Then there was another moment to repair his image again when he actually visited Puerto Rico and yet again he failed at repairing it by making light of the situation by shooting paper towels into the crowd as if it was a basketball. We also see Chaos theory in this crisis. “Chaos theory contains four elements: bifurcation, fractals, strange attractors, and self-organization. Bifurcation reflects when the level of danger is high and understanding of the event is low resulting in the most significant impact of the event. Fractals are information or variables that need to be organized in some fashion to allow the chaotic

environment to make some degree of sense. Strange attractors consider the factors that are involved when people unite with others in order to protect, defend, or otherwise provide support for their fellow man. Finally, self-organization is the process of learning from previous unsuccessful outcomes in order to make “better” sense of any given crisis situation.”(Lachlan, et al. 2020, pg31). With hurricane Maria the bifurcation is that the danger of this hurricane was actually higher than they anticipated which resulted in a low understanding of the outcome. The fractals in this situation would be hard to make sense due to the fact that they underestimated how strong the hurricane actually was. The strange attractors in this situation would be the people that united together to help each other after this disaster; community and the efforts from non-profit organizations and the government.

Press Coverage

Press coverage was somewhat happening during the post-hurricane relief efforts, but much of it was focused around what Trump was saying, not saying and/or doing in regards to Puerto Rico. A team of writers released their analysis in the Washington Post titled, “The mainstream media didn’t care about Puerto Rico until it became a Trump story.” (Peinado et al). In this analysis, they found that a scan of over 1,100 news outlets showed stories for storms that had made landfall prior to hurricane Maria and yet only about 500 of those outlets contained coverage about hurricane Maria. Separate from lack of coverage, a lot of the coverage that exists was highly politicized with mentions of the Senate, Democrats, and Republicans among other topics. Unfortunately, this is reflective of the way the U.S. media lacks interest in tragedies because of their cultural affinity. Puerto Rico continues to be treated as if it were totally detached from the United States when in reality that only gap here is the inability for Puerto Rican residents to vote in federal elections. Many news sources have attempted to shift blame to the

fact that the main language spoken on the island is Spanish but this fails to recognize the growing population of Hispanic/Latinos; a community that has grown over 1% within the total population since the hurricane.

Lessons Learned

First lesson learned was disaster preparation is of utmost importance. It became apparent not long after the hurricane that FEMA was actually not prepared to take on the disaster relief. This failure to plan appropriately would become a logistical obstacle that delayed relief to many citizens. The planning assessment for the island was outdated and did not include structural contingency planning. This was especially bad because FEMA had already “..anticipated that the territory would require extensive federal support in moving commodities” and yet still failed to act. (Shwartz).

The 2nd lesson learned from this disaster is that government agencies should avoid criticizing individuals who were impacted by a tragic event. President Trump’s initial remarks were not respectful of the people and what they had just endured. He continued to blame the Puerto Rican government for a lot of the damage caused by the hurricane; in particular making harrowing remarks about the Mayor of San Juan. He stated with complete disregard and empathy that “such poor leadership ability by the Mayor of San Juan, and others in Puerto Rico, who are not able to get their workers to help. They want everything to be done for them when it should be a community effort.”

A 3rd lesson learned was the vitality of effective communication that can be appropriately distributed to all stakeholders. The communication surrounding the scale of destruction was not distributed in real time on most national media news outlets. Due to the level of complete annihilation that hurricane caused, this made information inaccessible for

individuals on and off the island. Generally speaking, the communication was not as active as it should've been. This left many with a sense of uncertainty and as mentioned before, press coverage only began when Trump was the main character. There was no honesty and transparency in the communication leading to more questions than answers.

The fourth lesson learned would be how to prepare for future crisis events such as this using the CERC model and what they experienced on that tragic day. The CERC model has five stages: the first stage is the pre-crisis stage consisting of risk messages, warning and calls to preparation. The second stage is the event starting and in this stage the people are looking for information to help reduce any potential uncertainty that comes with the event. The third stage is the maintenance stage where the people affected by the crisis are reassured that everything is going to be okay and the communication between the people and those that are helping, usually the emergency managers and government officials are thorough and are providing feedback to each other. The fourth stage is the resolution stage where updates are being provided and understanding the situation becomes clearer and evaluated. The fifth and final stage is where lessons are learned and become documented for all involved stakeholders. So, rebuilding from what they have learned from experience and now using the CERC model to reinforce. This is a better position to take in order to manage the life cycle of the whole crisis, not just the situation.

The fifth lesson to learn from this disaster is that even while you think your leadership might be prepared for a natural disaster such as a hurricane there is a chance that you can still be under prepared. Living in an area that is prone to such natural disasters as a hurricane and knowing how strong it can possibly get there is no real way to prepare for it if it reaches such magnitude; leaving said area to find/build a new home might be the only option. This requires flexible leadership skills that are creative beyond general tasks given. Leadership should be

distributed according to what areas require most. For example, rebuilding the homes in the area is an option, but it is only temporary and history always repeats itself leaving those residents to be in the same situation that hurricane maria has left them in. In short, the fifth lesson is that you should prepare viable leaders as a form of aide, expect the best and prepare for the worst.

Recommendations

For starters one of the recommendations would be to better prepare on the side of FEMA since we knew a hurricane was going to hit Puerto Rico we just didn't know at such magnitude so, a better contingency plan for starters. Both the Puerto Rico government and FEMA can also learn from using the CERC model as well. Realizing that the infrastructure that was once had will have to be rebuilt to help for future disasters this is in terms of houses and other buildings. They will also have to create new ways of communication seeing as the plans they had at the time were diminished to nothing due to the hurricane; so a new backup or two so that there are multiple options in case things turn out to be as drastic as Maria or even worse. One more recommendation for FEMA would be to attempt to replenish resources on their end as quickly as possible; seeing how they helped during one disaster and didn't replenish their resources which left them in a terrible position when Maria hit and they were lacking resources. Who are the people supposed to rely on when the main agency whose purpose is to help those in times of need during a crisis can't help. Another recommendation that the government and the media in general can take into account is to lead with empathy when addressing victims. When we look back at how they handled this situation it was unethical and disrespectful to the people that lost their lives and those that lost just about everything they owned; the leaders/those who are in power need to lead in times of crisis not argue back and forth through the media like children when the livelihood of others are being negatively affected.

Ethics

The ethical aspect of the communication in this situation you can say that on paper they acted quickly in order to devise a plan to help but, actually getting it done has been a completely different story. That's all you can say about this situation being ethical communication wise.

The unethical aspects of the communication in this situation are for one the fact that there was so much focus on what Trump was saying, and not saying/doing which led to that being the focus instead of coverage of the people in Puerto Rico and what can we do to help them in their time of need. We believe that it was unethical to make the focus on Trump and what he was being criticized for instead of the people and figuring out a way for the United States to actually help its people when they're in such dire need. Another non-ethical aspect of communication that was shown rather than said verbally was how long it took for the government to actually help its citizens and it can be that the government doesn't really see Puerto Rico as a part of the United States. This can be due to the fact the language mainly spoke their is spanish and this might be consider a bit of a stretch making that claim we can't say for sure but, they made it very clear through actions that getting Puerto Rico back in good condition is not a top priority seeing how five years later they're still in the process of rebuilding so much.

Results

Unfortunately but unsurprisingly, the results of the communications were dire. Not only because communication infrastructure was decimated by the hurricane, but also the general lack of willingness from mainland news outlets to cover the tragedy in a non-political manner. A private contract exists with an energy company (LUMA) and it's highly criticized by the people of Puerto Rico. World renowned artist, Bad Bunny, has taken matters into his own hands utilizing his platform to call local and federal governments out for this contract because in 2022

the island continues to experience a wave of blackouts with electricity. FEMA has had reflective reporting for their efforts in 2017 and admitted to lack of overall preparedness. While they didn't outline exactly what steps are being taken to ensure these sorts of issues don't happen in the future, it's a good sign when a federal agency can admit their shortcomings.

It's no secret that press coverage lacked many elements that would've been present if national media didn't continuously treat Puerto Rico as a 2nd class citizen. In fact, TIME reported that "Just after Maria made landfall, a poll found that nearly half of Americans did not know Puerto Ricans were U.S. citizens. That likely wouldn't be true a month later, but the confusion is understandable, given the island's muddy history with the mainland." (Vick, K.). However, credit is due to independent journalist Bianca Graulu who has continued to push out stories detailing the failed response to and for Puerto Rico as a result of the damages caused by Hurricane Maria. As a result of her ongoing efforts, she was featured in Bad Bunny's video "El Apagon: Aqui Vive Gente." The documentary was a clear and concise recounting of the damage caused by natural disasters and the lack of assistance it has received. Bianca Graulu does an incredible job of humanizing the people even when they continue to suffer.

"Puerto Rico's financial oversight board has voted to extend a contract with LUMA Energy — the private U.S.-Canadian corporation that took over the island's power grid and is widely denounced by residents on the island for its inconsistent service and high prices. The privatization of Puerto Rico's power grid, supported by an unelected board appointed by the U.S. government, represents the "everyday consequences of colonialism," says independent reporter Bianca Graulau." (Goodman, A.).

In conclusion, the results of the disaster and the communications that would follow have left Puerto Rico in a constant state of war. Having endured another damaging hurricane in 2022, Puerto Rico continues to have to rebuild in many ways.

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