

Framing a crisis: the City of Cape Town's communications during the 2017-2018 water crisis

Erin Hill

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Between 2015 and 2017, Cape Town and the Western Cape experienced drought conditions. Consecutive dry winters had failed to provide enough rainfall to replenish supply dams. The drought became a water shortage crisis when authorities could not ensure regular supply levels before the next rainy season. In November 2017, the City of Cape Town (CoCT) announced that without drastic water consumption reduction, water users of Cape Town, including residents, businesses and public entities like school and hospitals, would face 'Day Zero' in a matter of months. 'Day Zero' referred to the moment when dam levels dropped below 13,5%, public supply would be cut off and people would have to collect a daily ration of 25 litres from one of 200 specified water points.

As the municipal government, the CoCT implemented restrictions, revised water tariffs, launched a city-wide campaign to encourage water conservation behaviour and worked to fast-track water augmentation schemes to bring new water into the system. They released multiple communications to the public relaying messages about the state of water availability, the urgent need to reduce consumption, and water saving methods. These messages were framed in different ways to convey specific meanings. The CoCT's water crisis response campaign (March 2017 – March 2018) was a reactive response to the water crisis that hinged on the need for public cooperation during the crisis in order to prevent the threat of 'Day Zero' actualising.

Using data sourced from the CoCT's website, this study analysed how the water crisis was framed in public communications that were aimed at private households and individual resident consumers. The study adopted a qualitative approach to identify frames. It did not seek to generalise about effective framing of water crises, as each water crisis will be subject to context-specific circumstances. However, the project produced a scheme of drought and water crisis framing types which could be useful for analysing other cases.

KEY FINDINGS

Analysing the CoCT's water crisis response communications uncovered trends and shifts inherent in the crisis.

Effective communications do not need homogenous framing. A heterogenous range of frames, which can cater to different audiences and different levels of behaviour change can be helpful in times of crisis.

A resource managing authority is likely to be more effective in catalysing public action if they are seen as trustworthy and reassuring.

Water consumption was reduced by 43% compared with pre-drought consumption levels, largely as a result of the CoCT's efforts.

The frame analysis showed that the CoCT was more reactive and less strategic in their communications than they might have liked to be.

The study highlighted the interconnectedness between communication, knowledge and behaviour.



Full thesis:

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Keywords:

Framing; water crisis; drought; Cape Town.



Above | Official poster, issued by the City of Cape Town.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The study analysed communication items released by the CoCT between March 2017 and March 2018 — the period when Cape Town was declared a local disaster area (3/3/2017), and when 'Day Zero' was announced to be officially deferred to 2019 or beyond (07/03/2018).

The project undertook a frame analysis to determine the types and characteristics of communication items released by the CoCT during this period. It used past research to shape and guide the identification of frames, while allowing for new or different frames to emerge through the analysis of empirical data.

Communication items analysed included: posters, photographs, information guides, infographics, a newsletter, speeches, press releases and public summaries. Through this combined approach patterns and trends were observed that contribute to a better understanding of the CoCT's framing of the water crisis.

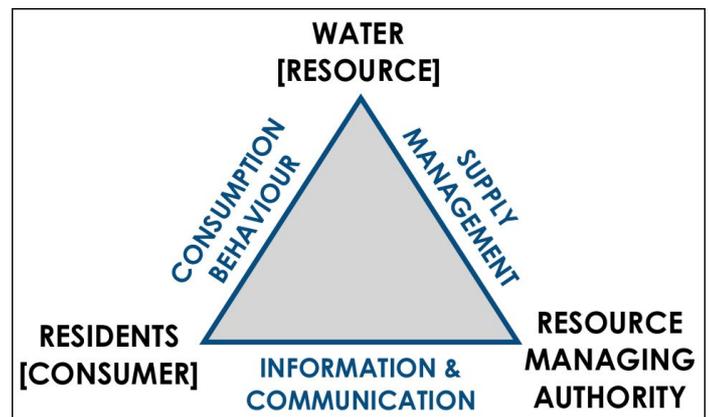
FRAMING

A process where thinking and perceptions on a particular matter are developed and orientated, or reoriented, from a particular viewpoint.

Frames can function unconsciously or be strategically created, and though often overlooked, are ubiquitous, providing shape and stability for understanding phenomena.

UNPACKING THE RESEARCH

Globally, many cities rely on governmental structures for vital resources and services such as energy, water and sanitation. These provisions are usually compensated through rates and taxes paid by the public, and the exchange is generally unnoteworthy. In this system the public plays a largely passive, consumer role and the managing authority holds the power and responsibility to ensure supply, access and quality of services.



Above | Triadic relationship between resource, consumer and water management.

Investigating the triadic relationship between water, consumers and managing authorities helps to better understand the social, political and biophysical dynamics. Through informational communications, tariff increases, punitive measures and incentive programmes, the resource managing authority can influence the consumers' demand. These relations can be strategically managed through communication of information and influential messaging.

A crisis threatens the provision of a resource and also the power of the managing authority, who interpret the situation and portray their perspective via framing to the public in an effort to influence an outcome. Frames matter because they are an exertion of the inherent power by the managing authority to influence how the situation is portrayed, perceived, understood, and responded to.

An analysis of frames illustrates how a narrative is constructed in response to a crisis and how that narrative can shape the public's perception of the situation and the actions they do or do not take. It is useful to analyse communications released by managing authorities, to grapple with the messages and identify how they are framed in order to explore strategic narratives, relationships between actors, and power relations constructed through communications.

Six frames were identified through analysing the set of CoCT communication items. Frames were not mutually exclusive and there were overlaps, ambiguity and contradictions among them. The use of these frames shifted temporally as the crisis developed.

Frame 1: The CoCT success story

The CoCT is framed as a responsible management authority, invested in the public's well being and in control of the situation. The frame presents the drought as an anomaly and an external phenomenon. It does not acknowledge previous planning and infrastructural insufficiencies and casts its provision and management of water as a success.

Frame 2: Obscurity and ambiguity

There is ambiguity about the nature and duration of the drought. The CoCT renders the matter complex and implies that they are the only appropriate administrator with the relevant knowledge and skills to deal with the situation. Since the nature of the drought is obscured, who should be accountable is also obscured.

Frame 3: Consumption is key

This frame encourages the public to reduce consumption through behaviour change. Household and private consumption is isolated as a major problem and reduced consumption presented as the way to avoid 'Day Zero'.

Frame 4: The situation is controllable

This frame points to the hydrological drought and high private consumption as the main problems and promotes technical solutions and demand management. The goal is less about promoting solutions, and more about promoting the notion that the situation is manageable by the CoCT.

Frame 5: Together we can beat the drought

Private water consumption reduction is targeted with the CoCT contributing via technical solutions and demand management. By appealing to collective effort, this frame uses notions of social belonging to foster public involvement in practical consumption changes. Military- and sport-type language is used to facilitate unity through phrases like "*Team Cape Town*". The plight of the drought is portrayed as the great leveller bringing together disparate classes of Cape Town residents.

Frame 6: Us versus them

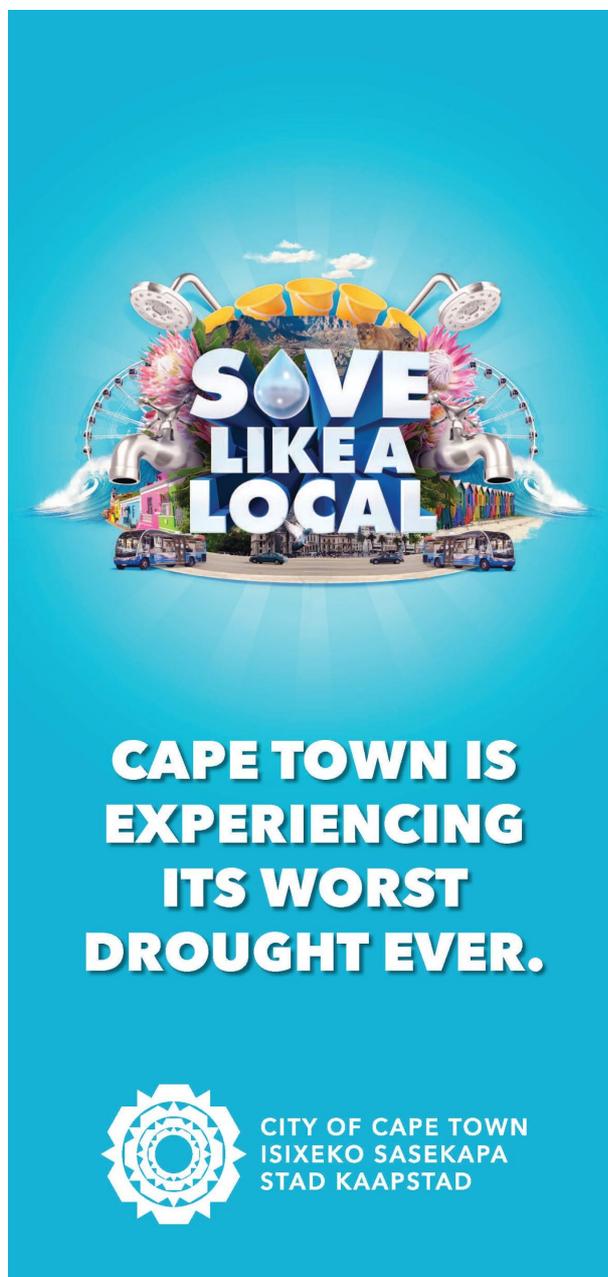
This frame externalises the problem, causes and solutions for the water crisis away from the CoCT. It focuses on high levels of private consumption and places the responsibility of remedying the situation on the public, who are cast as needing to change their behaviour in order to achieve the necessary water reductions.

KEY FRAMES IDENTIFIED			
Frame	Causal analysis	Remedy promotion	Moral judgements
THE CoCT SUCCESS STORY	Hydrological drought caused the water shortage	Technical solutions, pressure management	CoCT is a responsible management authority
OBSCURITY AND AMBIGUITY	Hydrological drought, technical limitations, and high levels of consumption caused the water shortage	Solutions to the problem are implied to be unclear	Frame is defined by vagueness and ambiguity of the crisis situation
CONSUMPTION IS KEY	High levels of private consumption (individual and household) was the primary factor that caused the water shortage	Private consumption reduction	Most effective method to reduce risk is to reduce consumption
THE SITUATION IS CONTROLLABLE	Hydrological drought together with high levels of private consumption (individual and household) caused the water shortage	Mixture of technical solutions and demand management	Ensure the CoCT's ability to ensure order
TOGETHER WE CAN BEAT THE DROUGHT	Hydrological drought together with high levels of private consumption (individual and household) caused the water shortage	Private consumption reduction, technical solutions and demand management	Public and CoCT are united in common cause to overcome the water shortage
US VERSUS THEM	High levels of private consumption (individual and household) caused water shortage	Water-saving behaviour by the public	Problem, cause, solution and responsibility are externalised away from CoCT

CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The coexistence of the six frames identified in this study reveals the mix of messages that the public were confronted with. The CoCT's communications campaign was nonetheless effective in that it contributed to achieving a significant drop in water consumption which played a key part in delaying 'Day Zero'. The key implication of this study is that despite seeming contradictions, a heterogeneous range of messages in communicating a crisis can reach and evoke appropriate responses from multiple audiences amongst the public.

- A range of frames that cater to a diverse audience and different levels of behaviour change can be effective, as long as there is repetition and cohesion of important points driving the crucial messages.
- The research showed that for communications to be effective, it helps for the managing authority to be reassuring, to have a stabilising effect and to communicate that the crisis is being navigated as best as possible, offering not only physical but also psychological security.
- Unifying the public through shared vulnerability and value of the resource can help foster collective action to overcome the crisis.
- Communications should seek to be clear and to avoid vagueness and ambiguity about cause, solution and responsibility in each communication item so that messages are interpretable and actionable.
- Managing authorities should be self-conscious about the framing of messages by proactively considering complex factors and effective solutions around crises, and preparing accordingly.



Above | Official poster, issued by the City of Cape Town.

FURTHER READING

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Author: Erin Hill, erinhill3000@gmail.com