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Towards the Final Frontier: Using Strategic Communication Activities to Engage the Latent Public as a Key Stakeholder in a Corporate Mission

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Abstract

Private corporations that do not normally interact with, nor regularly communicate with, the public often do not perceive the public as a relevant or active stakeholder. The public may not view themselves as a stakeholder, particularly when they are unaware of, have no direct dealings with, or do not have any problems associated with such a corporation. The current study, utilizing a national survey of the United States public (N = 424) found that through directed strategic communication activities of a private spaceflight corporation, utilizing social and new media tools, a latent public can perceive a corporation and its mission in a positive manner, and transition it towards a status of an aware public and possible active public. Positive perceptions were found regarding corporate credibility, brand

awareness, public engagement, communicating a corporate mission, educating the public, and influencing public opinion.

Introduction

In late fall of 2016, and somewhat reminiscent of President Kennedy's call for human exploration of the moon, former President Obama put forth his thoughts on the next goal of space exploration, calling for "sending humans to Mars by the 2030s and returning them safely to Earth, with the ultimate ambition to one day remain there for an extended time" (Obama, 2016, p. 3). This announcement came approximately 2 weeks after Space Exploration Technologies (SpaceX) founder, Chief Executive Officer, and Chief Technology Officer, Elon Musk, unveiled his corporation's plan, and associated technology, to launch manned missions to Mars, using what he called the Interplanetary Transport System (Musk, 2016). He stated his corporation's goal was to have a fully sustainable colony on Mars in 40 to 100 years (Newcomb, 2016). Such a massive endeavor, whether directed by a government or a private corporation, will likely require billions of dollars of funding, as well as strong support from the public.

The research presented will focus on the second of those requirements, support from the public, and in particular, how a privately owned corporation can accomplish this goal. Examining the strategic communication aspects of this process, particularly the "purposive communication" (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013, p. 74) is the primary goal of the current research. Corporations, like SpaceX, seek to use strategic communication to influence their stakeholders. However, under traditional Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), the public is not considered, or explicitly defined as a key stakeholder, or in some cases not a stakeholder at all. The public typically has no power, urgency, or legitimate connection (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997) to some private corporations in normal conditions. However, as Grunig (1983, 1997)) offers, there is a more nuanced way of examining the "public" in terms of it being a corporate stakeholder. In many cases, private corporations do not seek interaction or communication with the public because there is no inherent need or problem that requires this activity. However, when a problem or challenge arises, can a corporation use directed communication activities to its advantage? Can it successfully engage the public in a way that puts them on a path from latent public to aware public to possibly an active public, making them a key stakeholder in a corporation's success towards achieving its mission, goal, or solution to a problem? To answer these questions, an overview of Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) will be presented, along with Grunig's (1997) Situational Theory of Publics as a framework for understanding one corporation's communication activities. This is followed by a review of how the United States (U.S.) government communicated to the public during the key periods of U.S. spaceflight, from the Mercury program onward. This will set the stage for an examination of one corporation's attempt to engage a latent public in order to convert them to an aware and potentially active public, allowing the corporation to achieve their corporate mission.

Review of the literature
Strategic communication

In 2007, Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Vercic, and Sriramesh defined strategic communication as "communicating purposefully to advance the (the organization's) mission" (p. 4). Although this definition is frequently cited, Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2013) offered a more

comprehensive take, defining strategic communication as "the practice of deliberate and purposive communication a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communicative entity to reach set goals" (p. 74).

In particular, this updated definition highlights the importance of the public in the achievement of an organizational goal, which is directly relevant to the current study. Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Vercic, and Sriramesh (2007) note that strategic communication focuses on informative, persuasive, discursive, and relational communication in the context of achieving the organizational mission. It helps shape or define meaning, establish trust and reputation, and manages relationships with internal and external stakeholders to allow an organization to grow and operate as intended (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). It depends on the institution and suggests that the organization is intentional with its communication (Sandhu, 2009). Cutlip, Center, and Broom (1995) note that organizations that seek to alter the behavior of others can utilize four tools: a) physical force, b) patronage, c) purchase, or d) persuasion. This last option aims to promote approval of an idea or innovation and is at the heart of strategic communication. Hallahan et al. (2007) state that the fundamental goal of strategic communication is purposeful influence.

Stakeholder theories and publics

Strategic communication allows within its scope the investigation of stakeholder communication and all other communication practices relevant to the organization (Hallahan et al., 2007). Habermas (1979) noted that contemporary organizations are now seen as prominent social actors who play a critical role in public debate and discussion in society. "Strategic communication research can focus on how organizations interact with customers, employees, investors, government officials, and community leaders" (p. 27). To that end, it is crucial to understand the concepts of both stakeholders and the public.

Freeman's (1984) work on Stakeholder Theory has been an integral part of corporate and organization communication research from the very beginning. In terms of both academic research and direct application in the corporation, Stakeholder Theory has been a useful framework for examining the relationships a corporation must build and maintain in order to be successful. What follows is a brief overview of the theory, with particular attention paid to stakeholder categories and typologies, potential outcomes, and benefits related to stakeholder engagement, and the role communication plays.

Origins

The theory is fundamentally focused on how corporations or organizations can operate at their best through an understanding of the relationships corporations have with stakeholders. The concept of organizational stakeholders preceded Freeman's (1984) seminal work. In the early 1960s, the Stanford Research Institute (SRI) first defined stakeholders as groups whom an organization requires support from in order to exist. This originally included shareholders, employees, customers, suppliers, lenders, and society (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parma, & De Colle, 2010). Later this list added others, such as owners and the public. In general, there is little disagreement regarding the types of entities that have the potential to be stakeholders (Mitchell et al., 1997). Individuals, groups, neighborhoods, organizations, societies, and even the environment have been deemed stakeholders. Others include consumer advocate groups, special interest groups, media, government, and competitors (Freeman, Harrison, & Wicks, 2007).

Much of what we know from the literature in regard to the general public is that it exists in the abstract, contrasting the more scholarly approach that indicates it does not truly exist (see Newsome, Turk, & Krukeberg, 2010). Rather, individuals are all members of very definable or discrete publics. This in more in line with Carey's (1997) definition of the public:

> "The term public has traditionally meant any group (or possible individual) that has some involvement with an organization. . . From a public relations perspective, the term audience suggests a group of people who are recipients of something – a message or a performance. An audience is thus inherently passive. . .. In public relations, the term public (active audience) encompasses any group of people who are tied together, however loosely, by some common bond of interest or concern and who have consequences for an organization (p. 94).

Often, public and stakeholders are seen as synonyms, however, Grunig and Repper (1992) provide a much clearer delineation of the two constructs. They argue there is a subtle but key distinction, "People are stakeholders because they are in a category affected by decisions of an organization or if their decisions affect the organization" (p. 125). In most cases, members of the public do not normally affect or are affected by any one particular organization. As a result, research has focused on a more manageable and defined segment of the public.

When it comes to the public, typically the focus is on the smaller discrete public, such as communities. This stakeholder is narrowly defined in most cases and addresses how a community comes together around a particular issue (Himmelman, 2001; Lasker & Weiss, 2003). Freeman et al. (2010) note that community members allow organizations to be located within a community environment, build required facilities, employ local individuals, all with the goal of improved economic and social conditions for the members of the community. Another common area associated with research focuses on activist publics. Heath and Palenchar (2009) defined this group as "persons, identifiable by demographics or opinions who are likely to become activists if they recognize that their self-interests are harmed or helped by the actions of an organization" (p. 20). For some organizations, engaging the public in this manner can be difficult. This can be seen in almost any newspaper or news broadcast today, where attempts to move the public to coalesce around a single issue in the United States is nearly impossible. However, if a corporation were to find an issue around which it could engage the public to become an activist public, this activist public could become a critical and potentially essential stakeholder for that corporation.

Mitchell et al.'s (1997) typology classifies stakeholders based on three attributes: a) power – the extent to which an entity can gain access to power sources allowing it to impose its will on a corporation, b) legitimacy – the overall perception that the actions of an entity are wanted, genuine, and/or appropriate given the norms, values, or beliefs of an organization, and c) urgency – the degree to which an entity's issues require immediate attention by the organization. Using this typology and when a corporation has no direct or indirect connection to the public, it would be a struggle to define them as either a key stakeholder or even a stakeholder at all. Under these conditions, the public possess no power, primarily because they lack the ability to act in unison or have no desire to do so. Additionally, there is no legitimate connection to a corporation particularly if the public is not a customer, a current or potential client, nor do they have another beneficial or detrimental connection, and may not even be aware of a corporation's existence. Finally, because the public does not have a legitimate connection or an awareness of a corporation, there can be no sense of urgency as it relates to that corporation. Given

Mitchell et al.'s typology (1997) and our understanding of an activist public (Heath & Palenchar, 2009), the public as a whole often represents a potential or latent stakeholder.

This concept of different types of publics and their roles as stakeholders is the focus of Grunig's (1983, 1997) work that evolved into the Situational Theory of Publics. In order for a corporation to engage the public, it must understand the relationship of that public to the corporation. Grunig created a typology of four types of publics that provide for an evolutionary path to a corporate stakeholder. Each type of public differs to the extent to which they participate in some behavior to resolve a problem or concern based on how the public addressed previous similar situations. A latent public is one that faces a familiar problem but fails to detect the problem or issue of concern. When a group is able to recognize a problem or concern, then it becomes an aware public possessing the knowledge necessary to do something. Those groups who are able to face a problem, recognize the problem, and then attempt to resolve the problem are viewed as an active public. The final public is represented by those that choose not to face the problem or concern and are defined as a nonpublic. This theory has been widely researched across a variety of contexts including politics (Hamilton, 1992), retail customer service (Krishnamurthy, Moghan, & Wei, 2007), natural disasters (Major, 1998), and activist groups (Grunig, 1989). The path Grunig lays out from latent to active stakeholder represents a practical guide for a corporation to engage its publics relative to a problem, concern, or perhaps mission of a corporation.

What types of communication activities can a corporation perform that would engage a latent public towards a more important stakeholder role? This is at the heart of the current research. In order to understand and provide a response to that question, one must understand the public's potential impact on a corporation if the public can be transformed from a latent stakeholder to an aware or active public. It may be possible to engage a significant portion as an activist public (Heath & Palenchar, 2009), but the purpose must be clear to a corporation. Hallahan (2001) offered another way of looking at the concept of public. Hallahan noted four types of publics differentiated by those motivated by knowledge and cognitive involvement: a) active (high knowledge, high involvement), b) aroused (high involvement, low knowledge), c) aware (high knowledge, low involvement), and d) inactive (low knowledge, low involvement). A corporation must determine how best to engage the public with this in mind. Despite these challenges, there are potential benefits for a corporation that can successfully engage stakeholders and these benefits can potentially be applied to a relationship with the public.

Benefits of typical stakeholder engagement

Looking at corporate relationships with traditional stakeholders, Stakeholder Theory suggests that if we accept as a unit of analysis the relationship between the stakeholder and the corporation, then there is the possibility to address issues such as value creation, trade, corporate ethics, and others (Freeman et al., 2010). Given that one of the primary responsibilities of a corporate executive is to create as much value for possible stakeholders, this task is easier when the corporation has a clear sense of purpose. If this purpose, as Freeman et al. (2010) note, speaks to the "hearts and minds of key stakeholders" (p. 28) there is a greater likelihood of sustained success for the organization. De Bussy et al. (2003) posit that when conditions of trust, trustworthiness, and cooperation exist between a corporation and stakeholders, that relationship may be executed with greater efficiency, lower costs, and give the corporation a competitive advantage over competitors. One way these benefits can be obtained is through communication from the corporation.

Engagement and communication

Bruce and Shelley (2010) see stakeholder engagement as communication. They find engagement an all-encompassing term that covers all corporate efforts to understand and involve stakeholders in its activities and decisions. Engagement can provide the corporation with the ability to meet both tactical and strategic needs. Another way of examining this concept is through the term Organization-Public Relationships (OPR). These relationships are defined as "the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics" (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000, p. 18). Examples of engagement via OPRs include information gathering, trend spotting, improved organizational transparency, and building trust with individuals or groups critical to the long-term success of the organization. Unzicker, Clow, and Babakus (2000) found that a positive relationship can exist between effective internal communication and employee commitment. Internal organizational examples can include internal marketing campaigns that assist the organization in becoming customer conscious (Cahill, 1995) or that improve a corporation's sense of customer service quality (George, 1990).

The methods that corporations have utilized to engage their stakeholders have seen significant changes in the last decade; though research demonstrating the use of new media to enhance communication with stakeholders has been available for decades (see Pearson, 1989; and Botan, 1997). More recently, De Bussy, Ewing, and Pitt (2003) were able to demonstrate that the use of new media led to positive changes in: a) ethical work climate, b) mutual trust, c) attitude toward innovation, and d) goal alignment. They argue that Internet technologies empower employees. Hallahan (2004) indicated that organizations are being pushed to adapt to changing environmental media conditions by their own desire to coordinate communications, the convergence of various media, and the overlap of communication types.

It has also been shown (Hallahan et al., 2007) that some of these changes are being driven by technology and media economics. Social media, in particular and more recently, allows organizations and their members access to communication channels to disseminate information and dialogue with stakeholders (Meridith, 2012). In particular, the video platform YouTube is used to create both one-way and two-way communication between individuals, communities, and organizations (Lewis & Nichols, 2015). The main goal of this and other social media platforms, from a strategic communication perspective, is to generate positive communication about the organization for external stakeholders. Lewis and Nichols (2015) argue that although most are comfortable placing trust in family, friends, and acquaintances, the same cannot be easily said about organizations. Social media can be used effectively by an organization by engaging "fans" of an organization. These fans then champion the organization and the products, services, or organizational efforts to their own social media networks. Social media has changed how corporations generate and distribute corporate information in a manner that allows the stakeholders and the public to transform the information in ways unavailable in the past (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011). If these same communication tools and techniques were applied to engagement of the public, it could result in similar benefits for the corporation seeking to achieve its goals.

Additionally, Men and Tsai (2014) found a positive impact of public engagement through corporate use of social media on perceived corporate transparency. Furthermore, they found that interaction through social media influenced public evaluation of a corporation's authenticity. Stakeholder use of the corporate social media sites led stakeholders to be more trusting of, satisfied

with, and perceiving a stronger sense of commitment to the organization. Finally, Men and Tsai noted that the more that stakeholders engaged with the corporate social media, the more likely they were to become advocates for, and protectors of the corporation, and were willing to talk about the corporation within their own personal networks.

In summary, we can see that the latent public has the potential to become a key stakeholder if transitioned to an aware and then active public role. We also recognize the potential benefits that come with successful stakeholder engagement. Finally, we can see the role that communication, and in particular new and social media, can play in engaging and maintaining relationships with stakeholders. Now we examine a particular industry that has a rich history of engagement of the public as a stakeholder, but one that is also in transition.

Spaceflight and the public

Public support

As part of the Cold War, the United States sought ways to improve upon its technological superiority and was able to demonstrate some of this through the development of a national space program. Utilizing similar technologies to that of intercontinental missiles developed for the military, the U.S. government, through the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), was able to garner support from the public for these efforts. Kauffman (1991) argues that NASA's public relations campaign for the manned Mercury space program was so successful, that it established support for massive commitments of resources towards sending humans into space. This support remained relatively unimpeded until the Space Shuttle Challenger accident more than 20 years later.

In his research, Steinberg (2011) noted that historical polls regarding the public's opinion of the space program were relatively high from 1978 to 1997 with 68% voicing their approval. Approximately 10 years later, it was lower, but still 60% voiced support for the U.S. space program. This support from the public was seen as integral to the success of the program due to the large budgets assigned to these endeavors. To that end, research has indicated that the public associates many of NASA's biggest achievements (moon landing, space shuttle, Hubble telescope, space station) with high price tags (e.g., $1.5 billion to launch a space shuttle) (Steinberg, 2013). The public's knowledge of the NASA budget in relation to the overall U.S. government's budget is minimal at best. This can be seen in the public's approval of the space program, while less than 20% approve of increasing NASA's budget. NASA surveys from the late 1970s through 1990 demonstrated that few adults were both interested in and knowledgeable about space (Fries, 1992). Those with a higher degree of general education tended to be more supportive of NASA. This disconnect between public support and overall knowledge of the space program indicates a break down in comprehensive stakeholder engagement.

Steinberg (2013) sought to test the impact of educating the public about space policy, and in particular, knowledge of NASA's budget. He noted the efforts by Neil DeGrasse Tyson, a prominent physicist and public figure, who took a simple approach to educate the public about NASA's budget. Rather than discussing the budget in terms of billions of dollars, something difficult for the public to comprehend, he drew attention to the fact that out of every tax dollar collected, only about a half penny goes towards space exploration. Steinberg's research found that educating members of the public regarding budgetary issues resulted in a 29% increase in support, indicating the potential impact of education efforts aimed at the public.

Public engagement

NASA has often used the concepts of fantasy and imagination as a way to prime the public toward future endeavors, as well as to encourage those who might later grow up and work in the space exploration industry. This was often a challenge at the outset as it had to contend with some of the early and in some cases tragic failures of early rocket technology. One prominent example of tying into the fantasy and imagination of the public was demonstrated when NASA embraced the popularity of Star Trek, the television show itself inspired by NASA's endeavors. In the mid1970s, then U.S. President Ford was convinced by a very vocal fan base of the show to direct NASA to name the first Space Shuttle prototype after the fictional starship USS Enterprise (Wall, 2011).

Public engagement challenges

Krugman (1977) offered that despite the extensive media coverage during the Apollo era, positive publicity did not seem to have an equivalent positive impact on the public's support of the Apollo program. Potential explanations included: political challenges of the period, including the Vietnam War, and a greater concern for domestic issues. Although the public may generally support space exploration (Steinberg, 2011), Ehrenfreund and Peter (2009) note that globally, the public is relatively uninterested in space activities and thus does not significantly influence governments. Other research has shown that public awareness and public understanding do not correlate with public support or approval of large government spending for space endeavors (Billings, 2009).

Ehrenfreund and Peter (2009) argue, however, that when engaged in participatory ways, the public could become a powerful stakeholder, capable of influencing governments to provide stable long-term investments in the space sector and support government decisions in that budgetary context. In the past, as well as the present, U.S. presidents have used space travel as a way to energize and coalesce the public around a common goal and to offer them a vision of the future, very much in line with Grunig's (1997) theory. During the 2000s, Steinberg (2011) noted that public awareness and involvement has grown as a result of NASA's ability to better market and promote its activities through social media technologies including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

A new era in spaceflight

Moving to a hybrid approach

The exploration of space and the creation of technologies required to accomplish it are no longer restricted to governments (Anderson, 2013). Although private and public-sector corporations have always been involved in supporting space exploration initiatives, corporations are moving from the traditional support role to more of a partnership, or in some cases, have a more independent role. In the United States in particular, NASA is utilizing the creation of Space Act Agreements as a primary tool for creating new corporate partnerships that provide both technology and capabilities that NASA either no longer possess or wishes to step away from (Anderson, 2013). The Commercial Orbital Transport Services (COTS) and Commercial Crew & Cargo Program Office (C3PO) represent two of the largest endeavors that have enabled corporations, such as SpaceX, to innovate with spaceflight technologies to provide the capability to transport both materiel and astronauts to the International Space Station. NASA's capability to accomplish these tasks on its own ended when the Space Shuttle program concluded in July of 2011. The type of change currently underway was not seen as a beneficial option earlier in the U.S. space program. During the Space Shuttle era, the public believed that space exploration was just too uncertain for the private sector to lead, and that the U.S. government was the

proper steward of such endeavors. This was in contrast to the fact that the private sector was often responsible for the actual construction of spaceflight equipment used by NASA (Colino, 1987).

Space 2.0

Aldrin (2013) notes that one of the more promising trends in the exploration of space is the development of mature relationships between government and commercial space corporations. He offered SpaceX's achievement of launching a private space cargo vessel, successful docking at the International Space Station, and its safe return to Earth in 2012 as the epitome of the positive changes stemming from these relationships. "This week's successful launch and delivery of logistics supplies to the International Space Station by a U.S. commercial space corporation, reminds us that when the entrepreneurial interests of the private sector are aligned with NASA's mission to explore, America wins" (p. 77).

According to Schmidt (2014), SpaceX is one of the most prominent players in what is being referred to as NewSpace or Space 2.0. This refers to the commercialization of space and related exploration (Schmidt, 2014). It describes the partnerships of both public-sector entities (ex. NASA), private sector companies (e.g., SpaceX), and the innovation of spaceflight/exploration technologies, where both provide funding and resources to achieve mutual goals. Without these partnerships, the growth of NewSpace would not be possible. SpaceX, while being in existence approximately 16 years, is already taking on the space industry heavyweights, such as the United Launch Alliance (ULA), a joint venture between Lockheed Martin and Boeing (Dillow, 2016). This joint venture previously held a lock on most U.S. government launch contracts because ULA was the only provider of such services. The arrival of SpaceX and their Falcon 9 launch platform revolutionized the industry by bringing competition and innovation to an otherwise static situation. Meanwhile, ULA struggles to communicate with the public in the same effective ways as SpaceX.

Aldrin (2013) also notes that the goal of humans exploring Mars does not necessarily mean that it must be a government endeavor. He pointed to SpaceX's initial Red Dragon plans as one example. In early 2016, SpaceX announced that with logistical support from NASA, it would privately fund an attempt, as early as 2020, to send a spacecraft to land on Mars in an attempt to demonstrate some of the technologies that will be necessary in the future to establish a human presence (Cofield, 2016). Beyond this initial endeavor, SpaceX's CEO, Elon Musk, announced the corporation's intent to develop and deploy the technology necessary to begin a human colony on Mars (Musk, 2016).

New players, new rules

No longer constrained by the rules that government agencies are bound to, corporations are having to establish new ways of doing business in the NewSpace environment. Many of the newer corporations have to seek funding from sources other than the government to establish themselves. SpaceX is one of those corporations. Started with the personal funds of its founder, Elon Musk, SpaceX has gone on to earn both government and private contracts to deliver satellites, supplies, and eventually astronauts to space. One of their most interesting achievements, however, has nothing to do with space technology. Rather, their strategic communication activities are attempting to set a new standard in corporate-public engagement.

The most prominent example of these activities are their live-stream web events. As Hull (2016) noted, these webcasts are highly produced endeavors that provide the audience with a very detailed

and informative view of what goes into launching one of the corporation's Falcon 9 rockets. In the case of a December 2015 event, SpaceX was able to land the same rocket that had launched minutes before, back at what SpaceX calls Landing Zone 1 (LZ-1), near one of their launch facilities in Florida. The webcasts, as Hull notes, are designed to provide the audience with the information the public needs to understand regarding what they are witnessing, and to capture the public's imagination, and educating a new generation about space exploration. Dex Torricke-Barton, a SpaceX spokesperson, stated "educating and engaging more people about space will help us make faster progress, and each launch is an opportunity to do that" (Hull, 2016, p. 3).

Gauging the impact of corporate-public engagement

Utilizing SpaceX and their recent successes in both the spaceflight industry and their unique approach to corporate-public engagement, the current research seeks to assess the success of their strategic communication activities in engaging the public. Can SpaceX, through these strategic communication activities, successfully transform the public from a latent stakeholder status to a more aware and possible active public? Tying in some of the stakeholder research, we know that having a clear mission or vision for the corporation is vital (Freeman et al., 2010). SpaceX's mission statement provides a brief look at its past (origin), present, and future (vision): "SpaceX designs, manufactures and launches advanced rockets and spacecraft. The corporation was founded in 2002 to revolutionize space technology, with the ultimate goal of enabling people to live on other planets" (SpaceX, n.d.).

In addition to being its mission, it also represents what Grunig (1997) would refer to as the problem for the latent public to engage. The support of the public is likely needed for SpaceX to achieve this arguably lofty ambition. Through their strategic communication activities, in particular, their live webcasts, corporate videos, and informative website content, SpaceX directly targets the latent public, seeking their support, as if it were a key stakeholder on its path beyond Earth. This support is crucial as it equates with the public's trust in the organization. As future space endeavors, which are often very costly to the taxpayer, are planned or executed, only organizations that have demonstrated a strong performance track record, and that have earned the public's trust, will likely be given the opportunity to be a part of such new endeavors. For SpaceX in particular, as it designs and begins construction on its next rocket (Musk, 2016) designed to enable humans to travel to and colonize Mars, public support of this endeavor is essential. An endeavor such as this will require SpaceX to gain the funding, materiel support, and authorization of more traditional stakeholders such as investors, governments (who represent the public), and agencies such as NASA and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The lack of support from the public could prove detrimental to obtaining this support.

To that end, the current study seeks to determine if these directed strategic communication activities, utilized by SpaceX, can successfully engage a potentially latent public in order to achieve a variety of corporate stakeholder objectives. Accomplishing these objectives could ultimately allow the corporation to achieve its mission. The objectives being examined are: a) establish corporate credibility, b) build public awareness of corporate brand, c) communicate the corporate mission regarding the future, d) build a strong public communication strategy, e) educate the public about spaceflight, and f) influence public opinion regarding spaceflight. Thus, the following research questions are offered:

RQ_1 – Can a corporation establish or increase their corporate credibility with a latent public through directed communication activities?

RQ$_2$ – Can a corporation establish or increase a latent public's awareness of the corporation through directed communication activities?

RQ$_3$ – Can a corporation establish or increase a latent public's perceptions of organization-public engagement through directed communication activities?

RQ$_4$ – Can a corporation establish or increase a latent public's awareness of the corporation's mission regarding the future through directed communication activities?

RQ$_5$ – Can a corporation succeed in educating a latent public about the industry in which the corporation operates through directed communication activities?

RQ$_6$ – Can a corporation establish or increase a latent public's opinion regarding the industry in which the corporation operates through directed communication activities?

Methods

Participants

A total of 424 participants for this project were part of a sample (Qualtrics panel: 249 women, 175 men, Mage = 46.58 years, age range: 19–88 years), drawn from the U.S. population in late 2016/early 2017. The only qualifiers for the panel were participants must be 18 years old or older and that there should be a minimum 60/40 split by sex. To avoid self-selection, Qualtrics panel participants are recruited via an invitation-only process, which attracts a greater cross-section and generalizes better to the general population, the key demographic of the current research. Participants represented 45 different states across the nation. All participants had completed high school or an equivalent, with 18.6% attending some college, 25.5% earning a bachelor's degree, and 12.0% earning an advanced degree.

Procedures

Participants were asked to complete an online survey that was broken into four primary sections. An online survey was selected for several reasons: a) ease of presenting visual information (images, videos), b) cost effective access to a diverse sample of the population in the United States, c) the time efficient manner of data collection of such a large and geographically dispersed sample population. In the first section, the survey asked participants five general questions regarding their own understanding of the spaceflight industry. The questions examined the issues of funding responsibility, education responsibility, source of greatest innovation, primary influencer of public opinion, and most effective in influencing public opinion. For each item, participants could select from: a) government agency, b) publicly traded company, c) privately owned company, and d) non-governmental organization (NGO) (see Table 1). Finally, participants were asked to identify specific corporations they were familiar with from a provided list (see Table 2) of a variety of companies in the spaceflight industry. Companies on the list represented both small and very large corporations, as well as well-established and relatively new corporations.

Section 2 provided participants with specific information regarding one of those corporations (SpaceX) via their corporate website (www.spacex.com). Participants were then asked to watch 3 videos: a) a five-and-a-half-minute portion of a 45-minute publicly available, hosted webcast of a rocket launch to space (SpaceX, 2015), b) a three-and-a-half-minute corporate video highlighting the overall

mission introduced in the first video (SpaceX, 2016a), and c) a minute-long corporate video narrated by the SpaceX CEO detailing why its mission and future goals are important to everyone (SpaceX, 2013). Section 3 then asked participants to evaluate statements regarding the six potential objectives and associated research questions. Each measure (described below) utilized a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree and 7 = Strongly Agree).

Finally, Section 4 requested demographic information as well as some additional questions regarding a participant's personal history regarding spaceflight.

Measures for the survey utilized a combination of established measures, modifications or extensions of established measures, as well as some new measures. Background information and reliabilities for each measure are provided below. Table 3 provides the items for each of the six measures while Table 4 provides the correlations for all six measures.

Table 1. Pre-survey of spaceflight industry knowledge (*N* = 424).

| Item | Percentages | | | |
	Government Agency	Publicly Traded Company	Privately Owned Company	Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)
What type of organization do you think is primarily responsible for the funding of spaceflight and/or space exploration initiatives?	68.9	3.1	18.4	9.7
What type of organization do you think is primarily responsible for the education of the public regarding spaceflight and/or space exploration initiatives?	60.6	7.8	16.0	15.6
What type of organization do you think is primarily	40.1	12.7	37.3	9.9

responsible for the most recent innovations in spaceflight and/or space exploration technologies?				
What type of organization do you think is primarily responsible for influencing public opinion regarding spaceflight and/or space exploration initiatives?	47.6	10.1	25.7	16.5
What type of organization do you think is best capable of influencing public opinion regarding spaceflight and/or space exploration initiatives?	39.9	12.7	25.7	21.7

Table 2. Participant knowledge of provided spaceflight organizations (N = 424).

Corporation	Percentage	N
Sierra Nevada Corp.	15.8	67
Bigelow Aerospace	10.6	45
Orbital ATK	6.6	28
United Launch Alliance (ULA)	11.8	50
Blue Origin	10.8	46

XCOR Aerospace	7.5	32
Virgin Galactic	26.9	114
SpaceX	39.6	167
None	38.9	165

Table 3. Scale items.

Scale	Item
Establishing Corporate Credibility	● SpaceX has a great amount of experience in the spaceflight industry.
	● I trust SpaceX.
	● SpaceX is skilled at what they do in the spaceflight industry.
	● SpaceX makes truthful claims about their work in the spaceflight industry.
	● SpaceX has great expertise in the spaceflight industry.
	● SpaceX is honest in its communication with the general public.
	● *SpaceX does not have much experience in the spaceflight industry.
	● *I do not believe what SpaceX tells me as a member of the general public.
Influencing Brand Awareness	● I believe SpaceX is working to build a solid reputation in the eyes of the general public through its communication.
	● *SpaceX is not willing to devote resources to creating a positive relationship with the general public through its communication.
	● SpaceX is willing to devote resources to communicating with the general public on a regular basis.
	● SpaceX is working hard to communicate positive awareness of itself among the general public.
	● SpaceX effectively communicates its brand as a successful and innovative company.
	● SpaceX webcasts and corporate videos are effective tools to demonstrate its successes and innovations to the general public.
Communicating Public Engagement	● SpaceX seems to be the kind of company that invests time to communicate with the general public.
	● SpaceX demonstrates an interest in me as a member of the general public through its webcasts and corporate videos.
	● I feel that SpaceX communicates events that are of interest to the general public.
	● *SpaceX does not see my interests as a member of the general public aligning with their interests as a corporation.
	● I believe SpaceX, through its communication activities, is successful at creating a positive relationship with the general public.

	● As a member of the general public, I believe SpaceX should continue to engage the public through its communication activities.						
Communicating Corporate Mission	● SpaceX communicates openly about the future of spaceflight with the general public.						
	● SpaceX communicates openly about the future of space exploration with the general public.						
	● SpaceX has clearly communicated its future plans, regarding space exploration, to the general public.						
	● *SpaceX has not clearly communicated its future plans, regarding spaceflight, to the general public.						
	● SpaceX has clearly communicated its vision, regarding space exploration, with the general public.						
	● SpaceX has clearly communicated its vision, regarding humanity's future, with the general public.						
Educating Public	● I think that SpaceX strives to improve the general public's understanding of spaceflight through its communication activities.						
	● Through its use of live webcasts, corporate videos, and other communication activities, SpaceX strives to educate the public about modern spaceflight.						
	● I think that SpaceX is playing an active role in educating the general public about spaceflight through its communication activities.						
	● SpaceX is actively involved in communication activities that promote education of the general public regarding spaceflight.						
	● *SpaceX does not educate the public about the difficulties and challenges with spaceflight.						
	● Through its use of live webcasts, corporate videos, and other communication activities, SpaceX strives to educate the public about spaceflight innovations.						
Influencing Public Opinion	● I have a positive image of modern spaceflight initiatives.						
	● I have a positive image of the future of space exploration.						
	● I have a positive view of spaceflight innovation and technology.						
	● *I have a negative image of the progress being made towards space exploration.						
	● I am more supportive of modern spaceflight initiatives.						
	● I am more supportive of future space exploration.						

* Reverse coded items.

Table 4. Correlations of measures.

		1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Establishing Corporate Credibility	Pearson Correlation	1	.831**	.808**	.746**	.766**	.760**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

	N	424	424	424	424	424	424
2. Influencing Brand Awareness	Pearson Correlation		1	.850**	.802**	.819**	.719**
	Sig. (2-tailed)			.000	.000	.000	.000
	N		424	424	424	424	424
3. Communicating Public Engagement	Pearson Correlation			1	.858**	.878*	.792**
	Sig. (2-tailed)				.000	.000	.000
	N			424	424	424	424
4. Communicating Corporate Mission	Pearson Correlation				1	.863**	.799**
	Sig. (2-tailed)					.000	.000
	N				424	424	424
5. Educating Public	Pearson Correlation					1	.780**
	Sig. (2-tailed)						.000
	N					424	424
6. Influencing Public Opinion	Pearson Correlation						1
	Sig. (2-tailed)						
	N						424

** $p < .000$

Establishing corporate credibility

Newell and Goldsmith (2001) define corporate credibility as the perceptions that stakeholders have regarding a corporation's expertise and trustworthiness. In their study, they examined several different constructs and related studies in order to develop their own measure of corporate credibility. The measure, an eight-item scale, examined both constructs of expertise and trustworthiness and had a Chronbach's α of between .84 and .92 across two different samples. This same eight-item scale was utilized for this study (α = .92).

Influencing brand awareness

When examining the impact and importance of brand perceptions, Romaniuk and Sharp (2003) found that the more attributes (e.g., trustworthy, knowledgeable, smart, thinks ahead, cares, etc.) that were associated with a brand, the more loyal a customer was likely to be. With that in mind a short six-item measure was created (α = .92) to assess attributes of building brand perceptions/awareness.

Communicating corporate mission

Bruning and Galloway (2003) called for the creation and refinement of measures that address organization-public relationships. They note the importance that both scholars and practitioners place on understanding these relationships. Their 2003 measure examined several constructs, some of which were adapted and modified for use in the current study. The first of these constructs examined dimensions of anthropomorphism (α = .84), which looked at the future for an organization. In the current study, items were modified or created that examined SpaceX's ability to communicate its corporate mission, or what SpaceX sees as the corporation's future. The measure consisted of six items (α = .94).

Communicating public engagement and educating public

A second construct adapted from Bruning and Galloway (2003) was community improvement (α = .87), which examines a corporation's activities designed to improve conditions for its stakeholders and their environment. Here, two six-item measures were based off their 2003 measure. The first examines the impact of SpaceX's strategic communication activities as they relate to engaging a latent public (α = .93). The second scale examined SpaceX's ability through these strategic communication activities to educate a latent public about the corporation and the industry to which it belongs (α = .93).

Influencing public opinion

Finally, a new measure was developed for this project that examined SpaceX's ability to influence a latent public's opinion about spaceflight and space exploration. The items were created to parallel the types of items used by the other measures used in the current study. This six-item measure resulted in a Chronbach's α of .94.

Results

The data revealed significant findings regarding each of the six research questions presented. In addition to examining the data from each of the measures, additional tests were run examining the impact of several demographic variables: a) prior knowledge of spaceflight companies, b) prior knowledge of SpaceX, c) sex of respondent, d) state location of respondent, e) formal education level of the respondent, and f) prior experience viewing rocket launches to space. Additionally, the mean scores for each measure were compared to the midpoint for each measure (see Tables 5 & 6).

Establishing corporate credibility

Results indicated that the information and videos provided to the respondents had a strong positive result regarding the establishment of SpaceX's corporate credibility (M = 5.79, SD = .94). When comparing the means to the scale midpoint through one-sample t-tests, results indicated that the overall means were still significant ($p < .001$) across the full sample (N = 424). This was also the case for those that had some prior knowledge of spaceflight organizations (n = 259) and those that had no prior knowledge of the spaceflight organizations (n = 164).

Table 5. Scale minimums, maximums, means, standard deviations, and reliability.

Scale	N	Min	Max	M	SD	Cronbach's α
Establishing Corporate Credibility	424	2.63	7.00	5.78	0.94	.92
Influencing Brand Awareness	424	2.17	7.00	5.92	0.91	.92

Communicating Public Engagement	424	3.50	7.00	5.87	0.91	.93
Communicating Corporate Mission	424	2.67	7.00	5.81	0.98	.94
Educating Public	424	2.50	7.00	5.94	0.90	.94
Influencing Public Opinion	424	1.83	7.00	5.82	1.04	.94

Table 6. One-sample *t*-test of scales (comparing full sample to some or no knowledge of spaceflight industry).

	Test Value = 4				95% CI	
Scale	**Sample**	***t***	***df***	**Sig. (2-tailed)**	**Lower**	**Upper**
Establishing Corporate Credibility	Full Sample	39.29	423	.00	1.70	1.87
	Some Knowledge	33.09	258	.00	1.76	1.98
	No Knowledge	22.04	164	.00	1.50	1.80
Influencing Brand Awareness	Full Sample	43.55	423	.00	1.83	2.00
	Some Knowledge	37.73	258	.00	1.91	2.12
	No Knowledge	23.65	164	.00	1.61	1.90
Communicating Public Engagement	Full Sample	42.39	423	.00	1.79	1.96
	Some Knowledge	37.39	258	.00	1.88	2.09
	No Knowledge	22.55	164	.00	1.54	1.84
Communicating Corporate Mission	Full Sample	34.63	423	.00	1.71	1.90
	Some Knowledge	34.39	258	.00	1.81	2.03
	No Knowledge	19.51	164	.00	1.46	1.79
Educating Public	Full Sample	39.69	423	.00	1.85	2.02
	Some Knowledge	37.60	258	.00	1.90	2.11
	No Knowledge	24.65	164	.00	1.68	1.97
Influencing Public Opinion	Full Sample	31.65	423	.00	1.72	1.92
	Some Knowledge	34.62	258	.00	1.87	2.09
	No Knowledge	17.29	164	.00	1.39	1.75

Influencing brand awareness

Similar results were found for the measure gauging the building of a latent public awareness of SpaceX's corporate brand. Results indicated a strong positive result (M = 5.92, SD = .91). Comparisons to the midpoint score for the full sample, and those with some or no prior knowledge of spaceflight organizations indicated the mean values were significantly different (p < .001).

Communicating public engagement

The results regarding SpaceX's efforts to engage a latent public through its communication activities yielded strong positive scores as well (M = 5.87, SD = .91). The additional comparison of the mean score with the midpoint value indicated that the means were significantly different in all cases (p < .001).

Communicating corporate mission

The scores, examining the communication of SpaceX's corporate mission regarding the future, indicate strong support (M = 5.81, SD = .98). Comparison of the means to the midpoint value again indicated that the means in all three conditions were significantly different (p < .001).

Educating public

In regards to SpaceX's education efforts aimed at the public, respondents had a strong positive reaction (M = 5.94, SD = .90) with the highest mean scores and lowest standard deviation of all six measures. Then, t-test comparison of the means to the midpoint value yielded that the means were significantly different across all three conditions (p < .001).

Influencing public opinion

Finally, looking at SpaceX's ability to influence the public's opinion regarding spaceflight and space exploration yielded a strong positive mean score (5.82, SD = 1.04). Once again, the additional comparison of the mean score with the midpoint value indicated that the means were significantly different in all cases (p < .001).

Additional tests

A series of independent-samples t-tests were run to compare the scores of each of the measures across several demographic categories: a) knowledge of space industry companies, b) prior knowledge of SpaceX, c) sex of the respondent, d) state of residency (comparing states with a physical SpaceX presence to those that did not), and e) space launch viewing experience. Significant differences were found based on knowledge of space industry companies, prior knowledge of SpaceX, and previous space launch viewing experience with higher mean values for those with prior knowledge and experience (see Tables 7–9). The magnitude of the differences in the means across all measures and conditions varied with launch viewing experience having the smallest effect sizes (eta2 values of .04 through .10), followed by industry knowledge (eta2 values of .04 through .14). Knowledge of SpaceX yielded moderate-to-large effect sizes across the measures ranging from .07 to .15. Finally, a series of one-way between group analyses were conducted to examine the impact of formal education level for each of the six measures. No differences were found between groups regarding any of the objective measures.

Table 7. Independent samples *t*-test comparing prior knowledge of space industry companies.

Variable	Industry Knowledge	N	M	SD	t	p	eta²
Establishing Corporate Credibility	No	165	5.65	.96	2.32	.02	0.06
	Yes	259	5.87	.91			
Influencing Brand Awareness	No	165	5.76	.95	2.92	.01	0.09
	Yes	259	6.02	.86			
Communicating Public Engagement	No	165	5.69	.96	3.24	.00	0.10
	Yes	259	5.99	.86			
Communicating Corporate Mission	No	165	5.62	1.07	3.00	.00	0.09
	Yes	259	5.92	.90			
Educating Public	No	165	5.83	.95	2.02	.04	0.04
	Yes	259	6.01	.86			
Influencing Public Opinion	No	165	5.57	1.17	3.79	.00	0.14
	Yes	259	5.98	.92			

Table 8. Independent samples *t*-test comparing prior knowledge of spaceX.

Variable	SpaceX Knowledge	N	M	SD	t	p	eta²
Establishing Corporate Credibility	No	257	5.68	.96	2.88	.00	.09
	Yes	167	5.95	.87			
Influencing Brand Awareness	No	257	5.79	.93	3.69	.00	.13
	Yes	167	6.11	.83			
Communicating Public Engagement	No	257	5.74	.95	3.98	.00	.15
	Yes	167	6.08	.80			
Communicating Corporate Mission	No	257	5.67	1.04	3.54	.00	.13
	Yes	167	6.01	.85			
Educating Public	No	257	5.85	.94	2.56	.01	.07
	Yes	167	6.08	.82			
Influencing Public Opinion	No	257	5.68	1.11	3.57	.00	.13
	Yes	167	6.04	.89			

Table 9. Independent samples *t*-test comparing prior space launch viewing experience.

Variable	Launch Viewing Experience	N	M	SD	t	p	eta²
Establishing Corporate Credibility	No	135	5.61	1.01	2.66	.01	.04
	Yes	289	5.87	.89			
Influencing Brand Awareness	No	135	5.65	1.02	4.19	.00	.10
	Yes	289	6.04	.82			
Communicating Public Engagement	No	135	5.64	1.00	3.60	.00	.08
	Yes	289	5.98	.84			
Communicating Corporate Mission	No	135	5.59	1.07	3.11	.00	.06
	Yes	289	5.91	.92			
Educating Public	No	135	5.70	1.01	3.84	.00	.09
	Yes	289	6.05	.82			
Influencing Public Opinion	No	135	5.55	1.17	3.69	.00	.08
	Yes	289	5.94	.95			

Discussion

The results of this research offer a unique and current view of the impact of directed strategic communication activities for engaging a latent public. SpaceX's actions resulted in strong positive perceptions of corporate credibility, brand awareness, public engagement, communication of its mission, education, and influencing public opinion—all related to SpaceX efforts in spaceflight and space exploration. SpaceX, both with NASA and independently, has taken on the task of reenergizing the public's imagination regarding spaceflight and space exploration. But what does this research tell us in terms of understanding Stakeholder Theory in the context of the public and private corporations who would not normally see them as a key stakeholder? First it indicates that the Stakeholder Theory is sound and continues to expand its reach. Second, it demonstrates Grunig's (1997) Situational Publics Theory process in action by highlighting SpaceX's communication activities that are pushing a latent public towards a more aware status, and eventually an active status. Third, the impact of communication activities, utilizing newer communication tools like YouTube, provides corporations with better ways of accomplishing its communication goals, business goals, and objectives, towards creating a positive organization-public relationship.

Moving forward with the stakeholder approach

As Freeman et al. (2010) note, the takeaway from Freeman's original (1984) publication as described over 25 years later is: "No matter what you stand for, no matter what your ultimate purpose

may be, you must take into account the effects of your actions on others, as well as their potential effects on you" (p. 60). SpaceX seems to clearly understand this approach in terms of engaging the public as a latent and key stakeholder towards its mission to Mars and beyond. In many ways, SpaceX has NASA to thank for giving them some examples of how to best accomplish this engagement. Bellavita (1987) noted that historically, NASA has done best as an organization when it had a clear mission regarding human-centered spaceflight that could grab the attention of the public. An examination of SpaceX's mission statement lays out their clear goals and aspirations. Their strategic communication activities are being used to make this challenge known and of interest to the latent public. Given that a problem or crisis was not the impetus for such their strategic communication suggests that we should look to expand our understanding of publics in relations to more positive engagement scenarios.

Rethinking when to engage a latent public

One fairly consistent aspect of the current body of research on stakeholders and public engagement is the assumed need of a problem or crisis to activate a latent public into an active public. A better approach, and one that SpaceX uses and that may also benefit organizations beyond the spaceflight industry, is what Aldoory and Grunig (2012) refer to as the hot-issue publics. They define hot-issue publics as likely to be nonpublic or latent publics until a triggering event or media exposure highlights a problem. While the authors still frame "issue" as a problem to be addressed, issues could also represent opportunities to engage in a more positive, forward moving manner. Triggering events could be the discovery of a new innovation, or a challenge to improve, or achieve some public endeavor. This more positive approach to strategic communication and publics can also be seen in Zerfass and Huck (2007) work on innovation communication. They argue that communication should play a role in the promotion of innovation management as a requirement for success in today's corporate world. With the advent of new technologies and processes, whether in the spaceflight industry or beyond, corporations need to do a better job in their strategic communication relevant to these innovations to ensure a greater likelihood of success. The communication strategies being employed by SpaceX appear to meet this challenge.

Social and new media tools are key to organization-public engagement

Many types of organizations are seeking to adopt social media technologies as a strategic communication platform in order to engage an ever-present and knowledgeable public (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). Men and Tsai (2014) note that in contrast to a formally traditional, one-way model of communication, social media communication is interactive, participatory, collaborative, and in ways communal. This allows corporations, such as SpaceX, to engage stakeholders in conversations and meaningful relationships not possible with traditional media. These efforts can result in an aware public forming informal communities in support of a private corporation and its activities. SpaceX's efforts in strategic communication are not going unnoticed, particularly by their competition. Hosted launch webcasts have recently become standard for ULA (USA) and Arianespace (Europe), two traditional spaceflight organizations, as well as NewSpace companies such as Blue Origin (USA) and Rocket Lab (New Zealand).

One example in the case of SpaceX is a public Facebook group called "SpaceX." This group, created in May 2007, consists primarily of fans of the corporation, but also includes industry experts, and current and former SpaceX employees. The SpaceX public Facebook group discusses and shares a wide variety of content and opinions related to SpaceX, such as reactions to the latest SpaceX mission,

YouTube channel video, or webcast. According to a site moderator, who became a moderator in the spring of 2014, the group had about 4,000 members (B. Carton, personal communication, 1st October 2016). As SpaceX has grown in popularity and their achievements more frequent, so has the group's membership, which is nearing 40,000 members in April 2018. This is another indicator of the shift from latent public to aware and possible active public that SpaceX is hoping to achieve.

Content communities, such as YouTube, allow for the sharing of, conversations about, and modification of content provided by a corporation. SpaceX utilizes a dedicated YouTube channel to offer both its live webcasts, but also as a place to archive webcasts and present other videos of their achievements, and to allow viewers an opportunity to comment on and share the content with others. In late September 2016, SpaceX released a video animation of its proposed Interplanetary Transport Ship, designed to transport equipment and colonists to Mars (SpaceX, 2016b). In the first 24 hours of its release, the video garnered over one million views. A public engagement channel such as YouTube allows stakeholders to comment about products or services, ask questions, promote the corporation, offer assistance, and engage with the corporation in a more personal and social manner. SpaceX is not alone in the cultivation of these communities. Both Apple and Southwest Airlines have long been advocates for engaging various stakeholders through YouTube channels and other social media outlets. Apple, in particular has cultivated a cult following for its regular product announcements, which are often available as live webcasts, and then later as YouTube videos (https://www.youtube.com/user/Apple).

One of the potential outcomes of this form of communication is the ability to differentiate the corporation from competitors by establishing an emotional, spiritual, or other strong bond with consumers (Meyer, 1999). Similarly, Hoeffler and Keller (2002) contend that identification with a community focused on a particular brand can reflect a special relationship where customers may feel a kinship or affiliation towards others who feel the same way about a corporation. Kang (2014) found that many strategic communication initiatives focus on achieving positive effects on publics. These effects include awareness, knowledge, positive opinions, attitudes, and behaviors (Dozier & Ehling, 1992). As a result, public engagement has surfaced as a key concept in strategic communication contexts. Kang (2014) argues that public engagement is "the ultimate marker or maker for good organization-public relationship" (p. 400). Kang sees public engagement in one of three ways: a) as affective commitment, b) as positive affectivity, and c) as empowerment. Both trust and satisfaction are offered as antecedents of these engagements. SpaceX appears to be heading in this direction at a rapid pace, garnering public support and enthusiasm with each announcement, success, and even with some of their very public setbacks.

Limitations and future directions

There are a number of potential limitations to the currentstudy. First, there were two heavily covered media events regarding SpaceX just prior to the launch of the national survey. The first was the loss of a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket and satellite on the launch pad, during a test, prior to launch. This occurred approximately a month prior to the survey. The second event, which occurred about a week and half prior to the survey, was the public presentation given by SpaceX CEO, Elon Musk, where he revealed his corporation's initial plan for colonizing Mars. These events likely resulted in a somewhat greater awareness among the public regarding SpaceX. Additionally, the industry examined is going through a lot of significant changes as a whole, where activities of one corporation, or an organization

such as NASA, can have significant impacts in terms of a latent public's understanding for another corporation. The online survey data collection method can also be a limitation. Although it allows for a large sample of the public, it does not allow for a more visceral understanding of the impact of the webcasts and corporate videos.

In the future, additional research should be conducted that would allow for a more nuanced approach to understanding the impact of watching live corporate webcasts that would address the survey limitation noted above. Focus groups could be utilized to watch a webcast and then immediately gauge the participant's reactions to and thoughts regarding what they have viewed. Of particular interest should be the examination of positive issues that could be used to engage a latent public in order to gain their support in some useful capacity. Additionally, interviews with corporate representatives would provide for a more accurate understanding of the goals of a corporation when it comes to communication strategy regarding the latent public. A corporation's use of Twitter, as well as that of its CEO, could also provide a wealth of information to the public regarding the corporation's activities, reactions to events and crises, and general information the public might find interesting or relevant. An analysis of a corporation's tweets and those of the CEO may prove valuable in understanding the overall communication strategy of that corporation.

Conclusion

Private corporations with no or little direct contact with the public often do not perceive of the public as an important stakeholder. A latent public may not view themselves as a stakeholder particularly when they are unaware of, or have no direct dealings with such a corporation. However, there are benefits to engaging a latent public as a key stakeholder. The current study demonstrated that through directed strategic communication activities, utilizing new and social media tools, a latent public can perceive a corporation and its mission in a positive manner, potentially shifting them towards a status of an aware public, and possibly an active public. The resulting corporation-public relationship can provide support to the corporation towards achieving its mission, even when that mission ends on another planet.

Acknowledgments

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