

This research analysed how three different types of incumbents, a public, semi-public and private organisation, responded to grassroots groups regarding the controversial issue of Black Pete during Sinterklaas. Reasons for selecting these three different types was to determine if organisation type had an impact on the responses chosen. The incumbents analysed in this study included Ahold (with regards to Albert Heijn), the municipality of Amsterdam, and Platform Premair Onderwijs. In order to analyse these responses, a taxonomy of response strategies was also developed by combining the theory and empirical findings of two different authors.

Findings for this research include that all three incumbents responded in different ways to the issue, although all did change the appearance of Black Pete to their products or celebration helpers. It was evident that the response categories differed depending on which grassroots groups were taken into consideration. It was found that whilst a response can be considered open and cooperative for one group, another group can experience a closed response and ultimately be ignored. By using the taxonomy, it was determined that Ahold responded with both open and closed strategies, however overall took an open approach to the issue. Their main response was Create New Playing Field and thereby took up a co-optation strategy. This ultimately meant that Ahold engaged in discussions with grassroots groups, however no common solution was found. The municipality of Amsterdam responded with an open approach to the issue when considering those grassroots groups against the traditional figure of Black Pete. The main response was Collaborate and therefore took up a full-response strategy. However, for grassroots groups in favour of retaining the traditional Black Pete, the municipality responded with a closed approach, with a main response of Ignore and therefore is considered a collapsed response strategy. This means that the municipality engaged and found a common solution with those groups against the figure of Black Pete, however did not engage with grassroots groups who were in favour of the traditional figure. Lastly, Platform PO responded with a closed approach to the issue to all grassroots organisations. When considering those groups against the traditional figure of Black Pete, the main response was Change and thereby a pre-emption strategy. For those groups in favour of retaining the traditional Black Pete the response was Ignore and therefore a collapsed response strategy. This meant that whilst no grassroots groups were engaged with, the groups against the traditional figure of Black Pete had their objectives met of stripping Black Pete of negative stereotypes, however for those groups against a change to the figure did not meet their objectives.

Significant findings for this research include that contrary to expected outcomes, the type of organisation, being private or public, did not have an impact on response strategies. Instead, the role of the media, and the nature of the issue were stronger in determining response strategies. For those organisations that had a more direct relationship to public celebrations of Sinterklaas because of the nature of their business, such as Ahold and the municipality of Amsterdam, much more media attention was given to them and thereby stronger public scrutiny. This public attention was a very important reason for both incumbents to take up the issue and respond, which was largely facilitated by media inquiry. Alternatively, for Platform Premair Onderwijs, their media coverage and therefore public attention was minimal, and only given after a decision was made regarding Black Pete.

Additionally, given there are different preferences towards what the figure of Black Pete should look like, and indeed if there should be a Black Pete at all, this issue is very much a position issue. A closed approach presented greater risk for negative public backlash which would likely have created a more difficult situation. This rationale helped explain why both Ahold and the municipality of Amsterdam were open in their responses. Although Platform Premair Onderwijs had a closed approach, they also somewhat avoided making a choice themselves on the matter by deferring to the judgement made by an external and authoritative party.

Accountability structures were also helpful in explaining response. Whilst they differed for public and private entities, both helped explain why an open approach was ultimately chosen for the municipality of Amsterdam and Ahold. Where the municipality was concerned with being accountable and responsive to the public to maintain their democratic nature, and Ahold was concerned with accountability in terms of measurable results, such as profit but also stakeholder satisfaction. Although Platform Premair Onderwijs did not respond with an open approach, they still justified their response by being accountable to the ruling made by an external party, and claiming accountability by abiding to policy.

Finally, for this study, the model was a successful tool to evaluate the responses of the chosen three incumbents. Although these incumbents responded in ways that fit within the model, in order to fully evaluate the strength and usability of the model, future research should be carried out using other empirical cases to determine if these responses hold true for other issues and incumbents and whether or not additional responses are found.