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# PUBLIC RELATIONS REVIEW

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of Research  
and Comment*



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Editorial Offices: Ray Hiebert, Editor, Public Relations Review, College of Journalism, University of  
Maryland, College Park, MD 20742.

PR Bibliography Office: Albert Walker, Department of Communications, Northern Illinois University,  
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# Public Relations Review

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James Kauffman

# NASA in Crisis: The Space Agency's Public Relations Efforts Regarding the Hubble Space Telescope

**ABSTRACT:** This study examines NASA's public relations efforts regarding the Hubble Space Telescope in 1990. It proposes that NASA's poor public relations exacerbated the problems caused by the telescope's spherical aberration. To a great extent, NASA brought the crisis on itself. It oversold the telescope before it was deployed; it failed to develop a clear plan for dealing with first-light images and early release of photographs; it provided misleading flight reports; and it reported prematurely and incorrectly that the Hubble could not produce photographs. NASA's poor handling of the Hubble, coupled with its poor handling of the *Challenger* explosion, suggests the agency must improve its crisis communications if it hopes to maintain the trust and support of Congress and the American people into the twenty-first century.

James Kauffman is a member of the faculty of the Department of Speech Communication at Indiana University Southeast, in New Albany, IN.

On June 27, 1990, NASA held a press conference to announce that its Hubble Space Telescope suffered from a spherical aberration. The press immediately savaged the telescope. For example, the July 9, 1990 cover of *Newsweek* pictured the telescope with the caption, "NASA's \$1.5 Billion Blun-