

# Media and Disaster Management: The Role of Media

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## ABSTRACT

Mass media hold an important but often misunderstood role in disaster events. Research has consistently shown that media coverage of disasters tends to be widespread with misinformation and reinforces myths about race, social class, violence and criminal activity. Studies have also revealed that effective media messages can benefit mitigation efforts, enhance early warning systems, promote orderly and timely evacuation procedures, and help bring communities together in times of upheaval. This paper tries to examine research on the media-disaster relationship to highlight the many ways that media can positively influence disaster planning and recovery while also noting the many concerns associated with media coverage of disasters. Future directions for media-disasters research are considered along with ways that media workers and emergency management practitioners might more effectively manage the media-disaster relationship before, during, and after emergency events.

**Keywords** : media, disaster, disaster myths, media logic

## I. INTRODUCTION:

In the wake of sufferings caused by natural and man-made disasters in the last couple of decades, a new realisation is taking place in the contemporary world. There prevails a general comprehension to minimise the losses both to life and property to a maximum possible level through effective communication, utilising technology-based systems. Social scientists and experts are of the view that through a system of devoted international cooperation, human sufferings caused by catastrophic impacts of disasters could be reduced significantly. This cooperation revolves around public information and education; improved warning systems; disaster preparedness; and mitigation. These measures are aimed at ensuring

improved public safety and lower economic losses. If we observe closely, communication is the most important means for achieving all of the above-stated objectives. There is a paradigm shift toward disaster management approach in recent years. That is to prepare and plan for hazards in a proactive manner rather than waiting for them and reacting later. In recent history, communication has proved critical for the cause of disaster mitigation. It has provided not only the data management and analysis techniques but also increased our knowledge towards hazards' origins and behaviours. Advent of mass media in recent years has helped sensitise people in most effective manner through live coverage of hazards and prompt reporting.

Media has a direct link between the public and emergency organizations and plays a very important role in disseminating vital information to the public before, during and after disasters. The media assists in the management of disasters by educating the public about disasters; warning of hazards; gathering and transmitting information about affected areas; alerting government officials, relief organizations and the public to specific needs; and facilitating discussions about disaster preparedness and response for continuous improvement. To help the media fulfil these roles, direct and effective working relationships between the media and disaster management organizations should be established and maintained. Experience shows that regular interactions with the media before a disaster strikes, aids the effective flow of information and lays the groundwork for effective working relationships in the aftermath of a disaster. Understanding the importance of media communication, various humanitarian organisations have also established communication departments responsible for strong internal and external communication and media relationing. As per the new communication techniques for disaster management, it is now believed that the success of

humanitarian efforts depends largely on organisations' understanding of and relations with the media. There are certain activities in hazard mitigation and post-disaster activities, which are directly dependent on mass media. These activities are focused on creating public awareness about the risk and responses. Various advanced communication means can be used to give early warnings, evacuation plans and help post-disaster activities. The media can play a leadership role in changing the mind-set of society for making it more proactive rather than reactive. It also has the responsibility to make the message more valuable and credible for the general public. Sensational and hyped news can give birth to another crisis in the form of chaos and fear, causing more losses. In the last decade or so, there has been a flux of electronic media channels in across the world. The electronic media has an outreach to the masses, being present in every nook and corner of a country, and it is playing a comprehensive role in opinion making. One major contribution that the electronic media can make is establishment of early warning systems in far-flung and disaster-prone areas. Radio channels can play a primary role, as they have an outreach to most remote areas. The media contribution can lead to the development of a more robust community, which is more aware and educated about disaster preparedness and mitigation. We can see the example of Japan where the nation has stood united against the destruction of earthquakes coming on a regular basis. There are continuous awareness programmes, trainings and drills going on which are produced and telecast by the media throughout the country. The role of media is vital in the overall promotion of a better disaster management regime within a state. The role of print media cannot be neglected as it has been observed that receivers of the information have more trust in the written message than the word of mouth. The information given in newspapers is perceived as a reliable advice and people take it more seriously. Another much neglected aspect during the pre- and post-disaster activities is the lack of communication and coordination among humanitarian organisations, development partners and state agencies. This leads to duplication of efforts along with lack of effective work on ground, particularly in the sensitive areas. Improved communication among various organisations is a must, but that is only possible in pre-hazard period. There must be identified focal persons and departments dedicated for such coordination. For disaster mitigation or response, focal persons can remain in contact with partner organisations and government officials for effective

measures. Despite the fact that private media groups and channels do have commercial interests, the media's role in the case of a disaster should be based more on ethical and moral dimensions. This is one area where the media should be much more responsible in disseminating information. It must win people's confidence, and the provision of reliable information will serve the purpose. The media should not only be providing correct information and the right message at the right time but should also create an environment of solidarity and faith. This will help in augmenting the collective responsibility of all segments of society to tackle the challenges posed by any disaster.

#### **MEDIA AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE – A REVIEW:**

In managing disaster - the necessity of "right information at right time" has not changed for centuries. People need warnings ahead of the disaster and then, in its aftermath, data on casualties, damage, the supplies and skills that are needed, the best ways to bring in these resources, the help that is available and is being provided, and so on. There are many examples where - public education and the rapid, widespread dissemination of early warnings saved thousands of lives. In November 1970, for example, a tropical cyclone, combined with a high tide, struck south-eastern Bangladesh, leaving more than 300,000 people dead and 1.3 million homeless. In May 1985, a comparable cyclone and storm surge hit the same area. This time - there was better local dissemination of disaster warnings and the people were better prepared to respond to them. The loss of life, although still high, was 10,000 or about 3 percent of that in 1970. When a devastating cyclone struck the same area of Bangladesh in May 1994, fewer than 1,000 people died. 1977 cyclone in Andhra Pradesh, India killed 10,000 people, while a similar storm in the same area 13 years later killed only 910. The dramatic difference - was due to the fact that a new early-warning system connected with radio stations to alert people in low-lying areas, was put into place. On the other side - there are many examples where absence of an alert and warning system resulted into huge number of casualties and extensive damage of property. Bhopal gas leak, 1999 super cyclone in Orissa and 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami are few of the recent example in India where "timely alert" could have saved millions of lives and enormous property. There are many other examples which makes it clear that media, with its instantaneous outreach, throughout the world play a vital role in educating the public about disasters; warning of hazards;

gathering and transmitting information about affected areas; alerting government officials, relief organizations, and the public to specific needs; and facilitating discussions about disaster preparedness and response. The media can assist in pre-disaster education. They may be crucial to an effective warning process. They can provide information and advice to victims and others in the wake of disasters. They can help activate the local disaster response. They can assist in stimulating effective disaster relief. All this is not to say the media do not, on occasion, cause problems. They can help increase convergence to the scene both by the curious and by those with genuine concerns. By their own convergence, both in person and by telephone, they can create pressures on managers for information to the point where media demands interfere with effective response. They can spread rumours, and so alter the reality of disaster, at least to those well away from it, that they can bias the nature of the response. They can and do create myths about disasters, myths which will persist even among those with contrary disaster experience.

To understand the importance of mass media for disaster control and mitigation it is useful to distinguish communication situations along three dimensions stage (disaster prevention, acute disaster situation, disaster coping), audience (directly affected vs. unaffected population) and level of effects (individual vs. collective).

On the individual level and for the affected population information provided by mass media can be crucial in motivating and enabling them to prepare for the disaster, to act reasonably during the disaster and to recover after the disaster. Before and after the disaster mass media can stimulate a public debate in the affected communities on how to prepare for the disaster and which conclusions are to be drawn from the experiences during disasters. From the disaster management point of view mobilization of help from outside the affected communities (even international help) is the main function of mass media reporting on disasters with respect to the non-affected audience. Furthermore the reporting on actual disasters may help to increase the ranking of the disaster management issue on the policy agenda. It is often very hard to work with the media. There are a number of basic problems that sources "with a mission" have to deal with:

- Getting attention of media (what is important from the perspective of the sources may not be newsworthy from the perspective of the media),

- Getting one's message across undistorted (in particular: alarming vs. reassuring tone, recommendations of how to act in emergencies)
- Getting media to create an image of trustworthiness and credibility media reality
- Getting media out of the way in stressful situations (what is stressful for disaster managers may be interesting for the media).

The mentioned aspects are not exclusively problems of the disaster management; everybody being dependent in some way or another on the media has to overcome these or similar difficulties. As a result of these and other problems the expectations disaster managers have and their actual experiences with the media differ. The question that arises now is very pertinent: how can these discrepancies and problems be explained? There are a number of different explanations that people have whenever the media don't act as they expect. Some of the hypotheses most often expressed in such situations are:

- Journalists work awfully bad. They have no sense of responsibility, they lack of background knowledge and they prefer sensationalism over serious information.
- Disaster management is bad-prepared to deal with the media. There is a lack of resources allocated to public communication, a lack of preparation and a lack of competence.
- Professional rules of journalists and expectations of disaster managers differ according to different tasks, subcultures and constraints.

The primary goal of disaster managers of informing an audience reliably and credibly about risks and adequate protection behavior will often be hindered by the information preferences of the audiences themselves as well as by the "public arena" and "watchdog" function of the media. That means that there are goal conflicts among the different functions of mass media and between them and the goals of disaster management.

### THE ROLE OF MEDIA

The disasters are both natural and man-made. But the root causes of some of the seemingly natural disasters may also be certain human activities carried on in utter disregard of their consequences to the nature. Such natural disasters are also therefore preventable. Since all man-made disasters and some of the so called natural disasters are preventable, the media can educate and forewarn the people about the consequences of their dangerous actions and operations. More and in-depth education on the subject becomes necessary where the human activities and the natural calamities they lead to, are separated by a

period of time. In such cases, though the casual connection is direct, since the consequences occur at a distant point of time, the people fail to appreciate the link between the two and continue to indulge in their depredations on nature, digging in turn sometimes slowly, sometimes fast, a grave for humanity. The floods, droughts and water famine situations are many a times directly traceable to the human activity, while drainage mismanagement and air and water-pollution, environmental destruction and global warming are all clearly on account of the man's misdeeds. Some excavations and destruction of forests are responsible for landslides and mudflows, while according to some experts some earthquakes are caused by the construction of the large dams and by impounding large quantities of water in them. The dam failures, dam bursts, mine fires, epidemics, food poisoning, chemical and industrial disasters, nuclear disasters and all accident related disasters are undoubtedly the handiwork of man. The impending occurrence of some natural disasters whether induced by the Man' actions or otherwise, can now be known sufficiently in advance, thanks to the advances in science and technology. The media, by communicating the information to the people and the concerned authorities sufficiently in advance, can enable them to take the necessary steps to prevent and minimize the losses of lives and property.

The media can also play the role of delaying the measures that are being taken and monitoring them, cautioning the affected or to be affected people about the Dos and Don'ts, of scotching rumours and preventing panic and confusion, of establishing contacts, of identifying the needy spots and focusing attention on them, and generally by assisting the authorities, voluntary organizations and volunteers in reaching, informing and assuring the affected ones of the assistance and the measures taken, or their.

#### **AREAS WHERE MEDIA CAN CONTRIBUTE:**

Since disasters are a significant source of news and capture the attention of populations worldwide, the media provides tremendous visibility for disaster-related issues and, if used properly, can aid the process of disaster management very effectively. Some of the areas where media can contribute include:

Aid prioritization of Disaster Risk Issues - The media can influence the government to prioritize disaster risk issues, thereby ensuring that "self serving" political interests are not emphasized at the expense of the wider population. For

example, the media may expose excessive and inefficient expenditure to relocate persons from vulnerable areas just before a general election with a view to secure votes, while little or no attention is given to replenishing the stock of relief supplies in the national warehouse for distribution in the event of a disaster. This kind of exposure facilitates more prudent and balanced prioritization of disaster risk issues.

Facilitate creation of Early Warning Systems:Owing to the extensive outreach - the media can help disaster mitigation experts create Early Warning Systems by providing information on risks and existing technologies that can aid the development of useful concepts and systems. Emergency Alert System (EAS), which uses radio, TV and cable services across the country in United States for transmitting earlywarning, has been very effective.

Increase international donations:The media can trigger donations from the international community subsequent to the occurrence of national disasters, as well as push the government to increase budgetary allocations for disaster response programmes.

Improve coordination of risk assessment activities:The media can improve the coordination of risk-assessment activities between policymakers and donor communities. This integration of effort should result in increased availability of resources and improved work programmes geared towards saving lives of affected populations andvulnerable communities.

#### **IMPACT OF MEDIA:**

The media is a mere tool in the hands of the disaster management professional and can, therefore, yield positive or negative results depending on how it is used.

Positive effects of the media:

The media is usually the first to define the event as an official disaster. They inform the public about it and therefore heighten awareness. This resulting awareness influences public opinion about how the disaster is being managed and often determines the level of attention that relief agencies pay to a particular disaster.

1. The media provides instantaneous information and are considered to be trusted sources specially at the local level, where the news media have a "vested interest" in the hometown.
2. The network's continuous and factual coverage of incidents and post-disaster events can aid decision making and response immediately after a disaster, thereby saving lives and property.

3. The media is an invaluable asset in times of a disaster by disseminating information about public safety, giving useful details on areas such as impassable roadways and downed utility lines etc.

4. Other important public health concerns are usually addressed by issuing water safety advisories and providing information about sites where medical help is available for the public.

5. In the absence of telephones and other mechanisms for communicating with the world outside an affected area, the news media provides:

- the affected population with much needed information and
- the outside world with a glimpse of what that affected community is dealing with.

Negative effects of the media:

1. The media may exaggerate some elements of the disaster and create unnecessary panic.

2. The media's inaccurate portrayal of human behavior during and after disasters may create a very dramatic and exciting, but only partially truthful story. For instance, it is not uncommon to see footage of people looting after a disaster on all news networks, but most viewers may not realize that all the networks were covering the same store being looted. As a result, people may feel that widespread and uncontrollable looting is taking place in the affected area(s) which may not be true at all.

3. Influential politicians may manipulate the media for personal or political gains. For example, Hurricane Dean significantly affected the island of Jamaica a few weeks before the 2007 general elections. The electronic media consistently showed members of a particular political party issuing relief items to the poor, which sent a subliminal message that the political party in question was more responsive to the needs of the people than the other. Incidentally, the political party (that was portrayed in a positive light by the media) won the elections and now forms the new government of Jamaica.

4. News reporters may provide biased coverage for purposes of sensationalism by capturing horrific devastation on a street, choosing to ignore that on the opposite side of the street all the houses are intact with minor damage. This kind of "irresponsible journalism" may lead to the deployment of unnecessary and inappropriate resources to moderately affected areas thereby depriving the more severely affected areas of much needed aid.

5. Media representatives often converge on a high-profile event creating tremendous "congestion" in the affected area. This influx of individuals with

their own needs into an already burdened area can be overwhelming, which may hinder or compromise search and rescue operations, jeopardize rescuer safety and hamper the provision of care needed by the critically ill and injured.

The advancement in communication technology has added unimaginable value to the mass communication service produced and provided by media. Mass communications technology has already made significant impact on how the public learns of and perceives various socio-cultural issues in Indian society. Systematic dissemination of education, awareness and alerts on disaster management CAN be an add-on mass media service at a very low cost. We see from the above discussion that the media can play a very positive and important role in times of disaster, but can likewise, if not managed properly, hinder the response and recovery process. With this in mind, it is important to recognize that convergence of the media generally occurs after major disasters and, as such, a plan to effectively manage the media should be part of every disaster management plan and standard operating procedures.

#### **PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE MEDIA**

Media has a role to play in all phases of disasters. During actual hazard events the media is a crucial response partner in the rapid dissemination of warnings and information to vulnerable communities that would be most impacted. This role would become more important with the establishment of state Emergency Operation Centre (State EOC) network and Decision Support System (DSS). After a disaster has struck, news media can provide effective communication channels and can assist in rapidly providing a picture of how an incident has affected impacted areas, thus helping authorities to more efficiently direct aid and rescue efforts to survivors.

Media's role in disaster preparedness includes – Broadcasting of reliable information for the safety of the public, collection and distribution of information to/from the public, but the information requires the same verification as any other source of information used by journalists in order to be credible and reliable. Broadcast media can play a very effective role in educating the public about disasters; warning of hazards; gathering and transmitting information about affected areas; alerting government officials, relief organizations, and the public to specific needs; and facilitating discussions about disaster preparedness and response.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

For the media to fill their role in disaster management most effectively, it is important that an institutional framework is drawn and established for closer working relationships between disaster management agencies and the media.

**1. Strengthening Relationship and sharing resources:** It is necessary that media foster still-closer linkages with the hazard-mitigation community and shares their vast information-gathering and transmission resources, when appropriate and available, with disaster-mitigation organizations. The enormous technical resources of the major media could be very helpful to hazard-mitigation specialists with little or no adverse impact on media operations. In the post-disaster phase, for example, the facilities established by the media to report on an event are often far more robust and more promptly operational than those of relief organizations, whether governmental or voluntary. As the journalistic needs for the equipment are intermittent, sometimes as little as a few minutes per day, these channels are potentially available to specialists as a means for better assessing the nature and extent of damage, local relief requirements, the need for specialized recovery equipment, and unique problems or opportunities. Television not only multiplies the public's awareness of and involvement in others' suffering, but also could give direct help. Undercooperation agreements, for instance, broadcasters could make available any surplus remote transmission capacity to relief authorities desperate for electronic links to the disaster scene.

**2. Develop a basic code promoting cooperation** among the media and Disaster Management Agency (DMA) agencies. Here again, the first concern should be with the broadcast media, whose involvement is more intricate, and with whom there exists a greater potential for cooperative spinoff. Disaster relief and mitigation agencies should lay the groundwork for formal cooperation with the mass media, especially broadcasters.

**3. Plan and establish** National Emergency Alert System (NEAS), in line with EAS used in USA for direct dissemination of public alerts and warning from state and national level.

**4. Direct Connectivity to Transmission stations:** A more systematic state wide / national linkage with the media could improve early warning and can go to the next step in promoting an evacuation or alternative protective strategy. For example, television and radio receivers might potentially be adapted to enable them to deliver warnings even if they are turned off at the time. In essence, a high-

technology approach such as building an early-warning capability into radios or television sets is but one step removed from the concept of public air-raid sirens. It should raise no issue of privacy and the technology is certainly not beyond our grasp.

**5. Consider establishing a technological "information-exchange" mechanism,** so that those centrally involved--relief agencies and major networks--can constantly cross-check the significance and usefulness of what is available, and of what is around the next corner. May be emergency response communication network can include some of the important transmission stations.

**6. Designate and train disaster journalists:** Disaster journalism is a specialized area needing sensitization towards development of effective emergency communication or alerts. A new cadre of "Disaster correspondents," just as many media today designate reporters to cover politics, financial markets, and other specific "beats" is the need of hour. Such specialized journalists can improve the supply of information about the nature of and remedies for "high-tech" hazards, such as nuclear reactor malfunctions and toxic waste contamination.

The media and the public are more at ease with what they consider natural hazards--earthquakes, hurricanes, typhoons--than with hazards of more recent invention. The first category of hazard comes, as it were, "value-free" and the flow of information is accordingly reasonably pure. This is not the case with the second category, where the twin dangers of underplaying or exaggerating the seriousness of an accident are exacerbated by high levels of ignorance and uncertainty. Commercial pressures accentuate the problem. Organizations involved in the nuclear power and hazardous chemical businesses rightly fear the limits of public tolerance.

Therefore, from Windscale, through Three Mile Island, and on to Bhopal and Chernobyl, there is a history of impure information. Proprietors of these man-made hazards frequently complain that the media have got it wrong, whereas, in truth, the media lack adequate information to judge. Disaster Management agencies should plan and provide their expertise to journalists, not only at the moment of crisis, but also in prior training sessions and video and printed materials.

**7. Constitute State Emergency Communication committee (SECC)** with media included as member. SECC will have representatives from – State Disaster management authority,

Representative from broadcast association, Prasar Bharti, and representative from telecommunication / Wireless planning and coordination wing of ministry of communication.

## II. CONCLUSION:

The media play a unique role in disaster mitigation. Although the aims of the media and those of disaster mitigation organizations are not synonymous, without compromising the independence and integrity of either, much can be done to communicate to the public the information that will help many save their own lives. There exists huge opportunity for the media and hazard specialists to work together to support mutual interests and, more important, to serve the world community by tangibly reducing the risks of natural and manmade hazards. Media are an excellent vehicle to get to the public quickly. In addition to - provisioning media / press briefing room in State Emergency Operation Center (SEOC), disaster management agencies should consider followings while planning and developing state comprehensive emergency response and disaster management system.

- Provide all media equal, quick and effective access to crisis information
- Use technology to fairly distribute information
- Plan and establish SEOC data/voice/video connectivity with major broadcasting stations in the state on emergency communication network
- Specialized training and exercises for journalist from media agencies on various issues related to natural and manmade disasters and crisis information dissemination

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