



## Role Of Mass Media In Disaster Mitigation

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### ABSTRACT

*Man can control the loss of any man-made disaster but damage done by natural disaster can only be minimized. Media can play a significant role in minimizing this loss. Disaster preparation and mitigation initiate with the facts, data, sufficient information and its appropriate dissemination. Success of commercial advertisement and marketing reflects the use of communication strategies can play a major role in molding public opinion and perspective of media persons. It is therefore desirable to explore potential application of mass media in the field of disaster management. This paper tries to provide an overview of mass media as a communication tool for disaster mitigation through its timely reporting and coverage.*

**Keywords :** Disaster reporting, Mass media, Communication tools, Natural disaster.

### Introduction

Whenever any natural calamity strikes, the media gets breaking news and the country receives a huge amount of foreign aid for natural disaster relief and rehabilitation. Citizens and donors respond with swiftness and generosity. But once the tragedy ceases to dominate newspapers space and television channel slots, public interest drops steeply.

Media can play a very significant role in providing complete and correct information to the people about various natural disasters so that their effects can be mitigated. So far most of the disaster reporting has been done in the form news and features stories on its consequences like illness, loss of lives, lack of food and shelter, diseases, epidemics, etc. Undoubtedly, a large amount of information about these reaches us via mass media, but advance warning of disasters, where available; rarely or never reach the people through the media. Instead of flashing warnings, giving informing about such things as disaster preparedness, relief operations, capacity building for reconstruction, and sustainable development of communities, the media narrate the events only. This paper tries to provide an overview of mass media as a communication tool for disaster mitigation through its timely reporting and coverage.

### Current situation of disaster reporting

The present media coverage mainly includes news on the social, economic and health consequences of natural calamities that includes loss of life, injury, epidemiological threat, loss of crops, loss of housing, damage to infrastructure, disruption to communications, disruption of transport, panic, breakdown of social order and short-term migrations.

Though there has been considerable coverage of some of the disasters, this is usually done at the time these tragedies occur, and the coverage is episodic in nature, often bereft of scientific insights into the phenomena. This may be due to a fact Professor Steve Ross of Columbia University noted in 2005, namely, journalists' specialist knowledge. Except for the time when tragedy occurs, major science/disaster news finds a small space in leading national dailies in regular days.

Moreover, there appears to be a lack of resources allocated

to public communication, a lack of preparation and a lack of competence. Media search for topics that are melodramatic and amusing. Its treatment of disaster is selective and stereotyped... Journalists lack specialist knowledge and hence sensationalize serious information. Headlines highlight death tolls, injuries, damage and destruction, but mention is rarely made of disaster preparedness, lessons from the experiences, probability of its recurrence and preventive measures. The people need to arm themselves with timely communication so that human lives can be on saved. Media reporting can be crucial in enabling people to prepare for the disaster. Usually people hesitate to contact media that may lead to a communication breakdown when a real disaster strikes. Media's responsibility is to create an image of trustworthiness and credibility, which would results in an easy access to the population in disaster-prone areas.

The present study is designed to alert the media about their responsibilities in the coverage of such tragedies, as well as informing and helping people residing in disaster prone areas and to help them play a meaningful and constructive role for the people.

### Possibilities: what can be done

Disaster preparation and mitigation begin with facts, data, sufficient information and its appropriate dissemination. This can easily be done by the media. The success of commercial advertisement and marketing shows that the use of communication strategies can play a major role in molding public opinion. It is therefore desirable to explore potential application of mass media in the field of disaster management. The main aim of disaster reporting should be to save the people with news and views on important matters in a fair, accurate, unbiased and decent manner. This can educate, warn, inform, and empower people to take practical steps to protect themselves from natural hazards. Publication and announcement of inaccurate, baseless, misleading or sensationalist stories should be avoided. Apart from reporting, public information campaigns also can be very useful for this purpose. To be effective, such campaigns must be properly planned with a realistic timelines, adequate budgets and necessary resources for implementation. Timely and accurate communications can help in saving lives and reducing property damage by increasing public understanding of relevant issues and phenomena.

But why do we fall behind when any calamity takes place in spite of having all the required knowledge, resources and expert thoughts? Probably, communication tools like newspapers, TV, radio, film and the internet have sidelined the natural calamity as a topic of informed and comprehensive treatment in favor of political events, cricket, and entertainment programs.

Journalist can play a significant role if, instead of focusing solely on covering the event, they give a thought to what the media can do before and after catastrophe strikes. Some points for them to ponder are, how best they can inform the people of imminent dangers and possible preventive measures, how they should raise awareness about governmental and non-governmental prevention programmes (and critically assess their suitability at the same time), and how they can ensure that important lessons from the past are not simply forgotten.

But there is also a need to draw other stakeholders into the effort. For instance, scientific and disaster mitigation organizations can do they should seek to develop working relationships with the media, and provide timely information to the latter. This would result the dissemination of useful information to people in an effective manner before, during, and after the events.

Journalists of the national media need to be encouraged, to establish cooperation with local media in order to increase disaster knowledge and awareness among the threatened population. They need also to encourage people to cooperate with the media during acute disasters, start dialogue with them while reporting.

#### Example:

Kodrich and Laituri (2005) have narrated the formation of an online disaster community after the devastating earthquake which struck Gujarat on 26 January 2001, killing an estimated 20,000 people. Almost immediately after the quake, online news media began publishing details of it along with pleas for donations of money and other aid. In effect, a disaster-response community had formed in cyberspace. The authors explore the role of the news media in the formation of that community. They examines how the online sites of three leading English-language Indian dailies - The Times of India, The Hindu and The Hindustan Times - disseminated information about the disaster to the outside world. The study shows the media followed good professional practices in focusing on human needs and not overemphasizing foreign help. The media helped in the formation of a disaster-response community based on common interests as well as a geographic location of concern. This study illustrates the important role the online news media played in bringing together people concerned about one specific issue - in this case, the tragic earthquake in Gujarat.

We may imagine what would have happened if media would had played this role before the tragedy occurred. Possibly that would have helped in minimizing loss of life and injuries by providing timely information about protecting oneself during earthquakes. Such communications can educate, warn, inform, and empower people to take practical steps to protect themselves from these natural calamities. It would have played a vital role in enlightening the public about warning, gathering and sharing knowledge about affected areas, alerting government officials, relief organizations, and the public to specific needs, and assisting people about disaster preparedness and response.

The above study is an indicator that this is the right time to think about the role of media in lessening the damage any natural disaster may create. To gain an insight into this issue, it is necessary to first determine the actual degree of

coverage received by the topic. While this author was unable to locate any survey of the coverage of natural disasters, the degree of coverage given to science and technology can serve as an indicator, as disaster reporting is closely related to science and technology reporting.

One study (Dutt, Garg, 2009) has surveyed news items on science and technology in English-language newspapers published in different parts of India during January-December 1996. It was found that the greatest proportion of newspaper space was devoted to nuclear science and technology, followed by defense, space research, and astronomy. The Pioneer, the Hindu, and The Times of India together devoted about 23 percent of the total space to items on science and technology. The sources for most of the articles (97 percent) on policy issues originated from within India, while for other stories foreign sources, including those from the United States and the United Kingdom, also contributed. Many of the items were supported by illustrations such as photographs and diagrams. The study indicates that, on average, Indian newspapers devoted far less than one percent of the total printed space to articles and stories related to science and technology.

The following lessons can be drawn from the foregoing discussion:

- People expect the media as to be sympathetic partners and allies, but the media maintain a distance, acting as observer and critics instead.
- Media accurately reflecting reality but media constructs its own 'media reality'.
- The disaster management could easily be possible through warning, forecasting, public communication and campaigns. Communication tools, newspapers, surveys (assessment forms, consolidated report, final report), TV, local media, traditional or folk media, Internet, warning system, visible or audible signals, leaflets, announcements by speaker cars and public events can make a difference while disaster reporting.
- The pre-disaster preparedness period is more important than the disaster period. Reporting on disaster may help to increase the ranking of disaster management issues on policy agenda.
- Understanding of disaster reporting helps to communicate risk information effectively to the audiences' i.e. story placement, space or time allotment and use of visuals and graphics. This may reflect the audiences' preferences and a balanced reporting covering every side of disaster.
- News stories about a hazard should also be comprehensive, should include details such as likelihood of its occurrence the annual mortality associated in it.
- Disaster reporting may help in changing the mindset of governments by presenting the condition
- To develop an understanding of the risks of natural disasters amongst the people settled in risky areas and seismic zones.
- To plan long-term research into disaster preparedness
- Disaster reporting can guide people the disaster through telling them how to behave in emergencies, disseminating warnings and reassuring messages.
- On the individual level and for affected population information provided by mass media can be crucial in motivating and enabling them to prepare for the disaster to act reasonable 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 the disasters.

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