

ANALYSIS OF ROLE OF MEDIA IN DISASTER REPORTING IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Disaster brings serious disturbance in the regular activities of a community or society and may cause loss of lives, livelihoods and environmental disorder. These natural disasters are more challenging in the developing countries like India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh etc., where the impact of these natural disaster is often most devastating.

Media is the most important source of information on hazards and disasters for people. From the many decades role of mass media in disaster situation have received less attention by the researchers. Media play an important role in awareness raising and providing information to the masses. This role becomes crucial when it comes to reporting during disasters.

The research concluded that currently no code of conduct is available in authorities for reporting the disaster, however some training is provided to the reporters. Currently all the news channels including private and national news channels have self-regulatory code of conduct whereas any code of conduct for natural disaster reporting is still not exists in Pakistan. There is a need that National authorities formulate code of conduct for disaster reporting and disseminate it to the entire news channel so the channels and reporters are bound to cover the disaster within the limitations. At the end Guidelines is provided for Disaster Reporting that may help to alert the officials, emergency and aid organizations, about the specific needs of the affected people in the wake of disaster and in the provision of , accurate, timely, and sensitive information to the public.

Keywords: Disaster, media, disaster reporting, code of conduct, Pakistan

Introduction

Media is the most important source of information on hazards and disasters for people. From the many decades role of mass media in disaster situation have received less attention by the researchers. First step was taken by National Research Council who organized workshops in February 1979 in USA on media and disasters. National Academy of Science published its first report in 1980 which was entitled as Disasters and Mass media. This publication contained several reports which was presented in 1979's workshop. This report was the first attempt to focus on the media conduct during disasters. This report also highlighted the roles that media can play in times of disasters, which include raising awareness about the hazard by educating them, educating about the disaster warnings and its dissemination, details of hazard or disasters and its impact (including physical, economic, social, psychosocial), information provider about the sources of disaster assistance and coordinating with government and emergency response organizations. Media have always

been concerned with events and stories which have human impact. Natural disasters in some sense have the most impact as they destroy a large volume of human and material elements. Media provide the latest information and updates on the catastrophe and ongoing occurrences. Reporters are interested in collecting data and information about damage, destruction and casualties even when no one is yet clear about the situation in the early stages of the disaster. Responding to the increased interest of people for information about natural hazards in the wake of a natural disaster, media often go to their resource files and disseminate background information about natural disasters to cover the time and space allocated for disaster news stories. Such background information helps create awareness among the people about causes, impacts and aftermaths of a natural disaster.

However, in many disasters, it was seen that the media remained focused on the single story event (Joseph Scanlon & Alldred, 1982), such as the coverage of 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, ice Storm in Ottawa, Hurricane Katrina in USA and fires in Russia. As Miller & Goidel (2009) have noted, during Hurricane Katrina, the media had the invaluable role of reporting the ‘breaking news’ and everyday developments of the disaster, but were unable to gather contextually rich information about the causes and consequences of the natural disaster. Media such as television and newspapers also tend to favour the dramatic components of the disaster if they are available to “pump up ratings” and to be critical of governments (Ardalan, Linkov, Shubnikov, & Laporte, 2008). Media personnel are trained to gather information. Moreover, they are also trained to compete. They jump into an unknown situation to capture the story in the rush of being the first, original and exclusive. During disaster, hype is moved more quickly by the reporters competition with a desire to be the first to give the report on the incident. So journalists try to reach the scene immediately and use traditional as well as non-traditional methods to gather information which in turn becomes a commodity. Reporters not only head towards the scenes themselves but also rely on gathering information from victims, survivors, rescue workers, relief activists and government officials. Thus, media make the best use of the opportunity to sell themselves as organs of information when a disaster strikes. Their sole purpose to be there at the scene of disaster is to uphold their status of information provider in the eyes of the audience who thoroughly rely on the media for this specialized task

Analysis of Disaster Reporting in Pakistan:

While conducting the analysis following strength and weaknesses in disaster reporting were observed

Strengths

- Media channel provide the real time image
- Communicate the risk
- Act as a bridge of communication between victims and general public.
- Announce appeals of aid.
- Motivate the general public to help the victims
- Divert the attention of the officials towards the Tarbella Dam need
- Communicate the risk of epidemic
- Communicated the suffering of people to the officials.
- Divert the attention of the government for the need assessment
- Act as watch dog on donations, donations are given but not received by the affected people ARY news.
- Gave weather forecast for coming days.
- Helped the government on giving the early warning to evacuate the places. As people do not want to evacuate their places.
- Update the general public about the current situation of the suffering of the victims.
- Some news channel went to give aid to the victims

- Showed that which agencies and authorities work in front line
- Realize the government that it's not the time of fight but the time to help the victims.
- Update the general public about the preparedness of provincial authorities
- News channels brought the scale of devastation of the disaster into public knowledge
- They exposed the fake medical camps which were shut down after the visit of Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani.

Weaknesses

- While reporting in the wake of disaster, Media personal talked directly to the victims just after the event. They show the anger of victims upon the government on television screens. This may results in the loss of credibility of government in front of international organizations. That's why international don't give donation directly to the organizations and send the donations through their friend organization like NGOs, In this way donations receive but it slowly come to the affected people. Media reporters should not display such type of anger on the screens.
- It is seen that media reporters made the stories on the suffering of people which show the victim as helpless and in degraded situation.
- Media every time degrade the government on their feeble response.
- It is seen that while reporting when they are not confirmed about the fact and figures on deaths and damage of roads and bridges, they are giving wrong figures about the damage by their own assumption
- It is seen that media report on the event as make them breaking news, as the time passed i.e., after 3 months when the flood water was no more they did not communicated the suffering of affected people who are still in pain.
- They gave the information on response and relief phase.
- It is seen that some news channels give the biased coverage to the political parties and exaggerate their donations.
- Showed that there is no coordination among the government.
- The reporters choose the places that are easy to cover
- Extraordinary situation require extra ordinary effort. Which is not seen?
- Many channels that cannot cover the event by going there take the video from other channels and make that news.
- Reporters tend to exaggerate the situation.
- The rescuing efforts were ignored by the reporters.
- For attracting more audience, some news channels showed that media reached those places where government has not reached yet.
- Some news channels use these disasters for promoting their own channel i.e., like Aaj news, Geo News, Ary News channel shown their team giving aid to the affected people, and some channels like express news started express relief fund to promote its channel, it can be effective if there is transparency and accountability.
- Some of the reporters engaged with politicians to display their relief effort. It was good attempt but during disaster reporting, the reporter should give an objective view of the situation.
- Flood 2010 reporting showed that the women are actively engaged in reporting from ground in the affected area and in the discussion of reconstruction. But women reporters and anchors emphasized more on governance issues rather than emphasizing the health and protection issues which was the foremost concern for women and children in the affected areas observed.

Conclusion

Disaster reporting, when the disaster is of high magnitude is very difficult. It is viewed in the literature that developed countries even USA media faced immense criticism for its reporting of hurricane Katrina in September 2005 for providing sketchy information and presenting rumors as facts (Mann, 2007: 231). At the same time President Bush was accused by the media of slackness in responding to the hurricane. President Bush's defenders gave a lot of explanations of which one was that Bush was correct not to visit the disaster sites immediately because to do so would have greatly complicated the relief efforts on the ground.

Since natural disasters are increasing all over the world, such events are more challenging for developing countries like Pakistan because of lack of preparedness. Media played a very important role in covering two major natural disasters, Earthquake 2005 & Floods 2010. Each day media gave updates regarding warning, alerts, awareness, evacuation and details of victims. Media acted as a bridge of communication between affected people, general public and national and international aid agencies. Media showed that during these events the rescue and relief activities are self-motivated and that during these events NGO's, armed forces, and volunteers provided the immediate relief to the victims. During both events media played a key role in assessing, mobilizing and prioritizing the need of goods and medicine. On the other side Media's constant focus on governance has engaged public interest in earthquake 2005 and flood 2010. Media every time degrade the government on their feeble response. While reporting both events, Media reporters talked directly to the victims and cover the anger of victims upon the government on television screens. This may results in the loss of credibility of government in front of international organizations. For this reason international aid organizations don't give donation directly to the government and send the donations through their friend organization like NGOs, in this way although donations received but it slowly come to the affected people. Media reporters should not display such type of anger on the screens. By conducting the in-depth interviews with media officials it is concluded that currently no code of conduct are available in authorities for reporting the disaster, however training are given to the reporters as said by the PEMRA officials. Currently all the news channels including private and national news channels have self-regulatory code of conduct where the conduct of natural disaster reporting is still not existing after two mega disasters in Pakistan. So there is a need that National authorities make code of conduct for disaster reporting and disseminate it to all the news channels so the channels and reporters are bound to cover the disaster within the limitations.

Proposed Guidelines

- As the people trust the media, so it is the responsibility of electronic media reporter to seek and provide the true information to the public. Reporters should be answerable for their actions.
- Media have the capacity to provide the services to public in the wake of an event. They can give the direction to the affected people and disseminate the information to public that similar disaster can happen in the future. It is possible only when media be a part of disaster planning before the event because their reporting will be more informative and accurate if media know the local players and programs ahead of time. Emergency managers need a well-informed media to communicate with the public regarding the priority of needs, the progress being made and to correct and dispel rumors.
- Electronic media reporters should tell the public on the importance of preparedness by producing programs, documentaries, dramas, and songs on natural disaster and its impacts.
- An off air activity should be organized by electronic media in which it is informed to the public in advance that a program on natural disaster will be broadcasted live together with the local residents of particular area in which reporters can convey the experiences of people

related to the disaster, communicate the costliness of life, and the significance of preparedness to the general public.

- Electronic media can play a very important role in providing the early warning to the public but care should be taken while transmission of the early warning. It should be in clear words and confirmed through the reliable sources to avoid the false reports and unnecessary panic.
- In the wake of disaster electronic media reporters should have to get ready themselves with the background of disaster at hand and should examine the information which they received from official sources.
- Reporters should confirm that the information being provided is accurate.
- Reporter should treat disaster affectees with respect by thinking that how would he want to be treated in a similar situation.
- Reporters should proceed towards the survivors carefully and the reporters must be trained on when and how to back off from the situation. They should expect severe responses from the victims. They must be trained of not giving the same response back to the victims.
- Reporters should not ask the survivors violent questions first and should not talk too much with victims.
- Reporters must find practical ways of helping the victims within the communities. They must incorporate the good deed in their reporting by the provision of hope to the community.
- In the wake of disaster, reporters should not highlight the public outcry and then depict the failure of the government in coping with such a large magnitude of disaster that was far off its capability and, afterwards, entitled it as corrupt and unreliable of handling the national and international aid.
- Women reporters who are now engaged in reporting should highlight the issues related to the women protection and health.
- Reporters should provide the information to the public for precautionary measures, e.g. evacuation, areas they should not go to, water purification techniques for safe drinking water etc.
- Reporters should highlight the action being taken by government to save the lives of people in affected area.
- It is seen that reporters don't prefer to go and cover the impact of disaster in far flung remote rural areas due to which the needs of affected people in rural areas remain unaddressed. Reporters should be trained and encourage to go and cover the devastation caused by natural disaster in rural areas.
- In the wake of any disaster when it is of high magnitude, means of information may also be affected. To overcome this problem a disaster communication radio station could be established to disseminate the information about the distribution of donation and reporting of missing people.
- In the post disaster phase, media can highlight the difficulties of the people affected by the event.
- Media should also expand its role as a watchdog in monitoring and handling of donations in the post disaster phase and transparency and accountability in the use of funds for rehabilitation and reconstruction.
- The media should also remind the government about the implementation of recovery programs to avoid the wastages of funds in other irrelevant projects.
- Media should mobilize the assistance by assessing the needs of people and communicate those needs to the national and international donors in post disaster phase.

- Media should inform the public as well as other stakeholders about the government work on reconstruction plans to ensure the stakeholders that the needs of affected people are truly addressed.
- While reporting on reconstruction phase, media should highlight the need for the integration of risk reduction measures in reconstruction projects to ensure that the infrastructure is safer from future disaster

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