



# Time and Ethics in Delivering Bad News in Institutionalized and Social Media

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## Introduction

The public is exposed to information through two types of communication: institutionalized (radio, newspapers, and television) and informal, which includes information obtained through social networks (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Telegram) and mediated interpersonal communication (phone). In the case of institutionalized media, consumers are not active partners in content creation. Regarding social networks, the users are both content producers and content consumers. The two types of communication operate through different dynamics. The former assumes responsibility and has a commitment to the reliability of the content; therefore, it includes control mechanisms. The latter distributes information rapidly and without commitment to its reliability. This article focuses on the dynamics of information transfer in institutionalized and collaborative media during a mass casualty incident. The questions of how the public searches for information in the media and which factors affect the use of media in times of crisis are discussed in the research literature (see for example, Austin et al., 2012). Both types of communication were found to have psychological and social importance during a crisis. The public uses social media in times of crisis to obtain immediate

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information and establish direct contact with family and friends (Bates & Callison, 2008), and traditional media to obtain comprehensive and reliable information about the event. Additionally, uses and gratifications theory indicates that people use media as a response to several interconnected needs, such as emotional and social support (Urista et al., 2009) and the search for information.

Information and emotional needs are the main motivations for using social media as a personal response in a crisis (Jin & Liu, 2010; Liu et al., 2020). People use various types of social media, such as Facebook and texting, in times of crisis to share or receive internal information and to check in with relatives and friends. During a mass casualty event, both reliable and unreliable information is distributed simultaneously in institutional and collaborative networks. Institutional media is generally treated as a more reliable source of hard-to-digest news than collaborative media, which offers faster and wider distribution. Collaborative communication enables the exchange of content by many end users. For example, about two billion users are active every month on WhatsApp alone (Reuter & Kaufhold, 2018). The tension between the need to know as quickly as possible and a regular and structured process takes on a powerful expression when news of casualties begins to roll out, from the knowledge of a serious incident involving a family member to the formal moment of verification that the worst has happened.

Until the early 2000s, the public was exposed to current events mainly by watching news broadcasts on television, listening to the radio, or reading newspapers. The journalists or editors of news programs were the ones who decided for the information consumers what items were newsworthy and what should remain outside the scope of the viewers' or readers' knowledge. In the early 2000s, social networks that disseminate information emerged, where citizens are content creators and distributors, and serve as 'journalists in the field' (Hagar, 2013). The intrusion of social networks into the world of communication undermined the orderly process that was carefully designed for delivering difficult-to-digest news, including the worst possible items. The proliferation of mobile phone cameras and social networks turned every person witnessing an event into a journalist who can transmit information to a wide circle of viewers and readers without any possibility of regulation

(Lev-On & Uziel, 2018). In times of crisis, accessing relevant information is essential for victims' families, and social networks have become a readily available source of rapid information exchange between members of the online community following crisis events (Mitra et al., 2017). At times, this information includes unverified rumors that are spread informally, which is especially common in situations of crisis and disaster (Liu et al., 2014).

Since the Twin Towers disaster, in 2001, researchers have been monitoring the dissemination of information in the collaborative media during mass casualty events. Studies have consistently shown that citizens seek information on all available media channels, as demonstrated in cases of the Great East Japan Earthquake (2011) and Hurricane Sandy (2012) (Burger et al., 2013; Mitomo et al., 2013). During the Japan earthquake, more than half of Japanese citizens used social media to search for information related to the disaster (Peary et al., 2012). A study conducted in the European Union found that many people used social media to search for information and share it during an emergency (Petersen et al., 2021). Both Facebook and Twitter were heavily used in Germany during the floods in Europe, in 2013 (Kaufhold et al., 2016). Reports and photos from the field are uploaded to social networks usually without the information being validated, which includes partial information and personal interpretations of the event. Collaborative communication, which includes social networks, plays a central role in spreading rumors because of the speed of message transmission and interactivity, which allows everyone to respond to a message (Silverman 2015). Providing a beneficial humanitarian mental response requires narrowing the gaps between the rescue effort, the identification, and the notification of families. When families are in the horrific situation of "knowing/not knowing," the support that can be provided to them is limited because they cannot proceed to the grieving stage. Even if the tragedy is almost certain, the family keeps hoping for a miracle. It is only the delivery of clear and unequivocal information that allows the transition to receiving the broad social support required in situations of loss.

The perception of the reliability of social media among the public during crises is changing. New studies (e.g., Petersen et al., 2021;

Woschnagg et al., 2023) indicate that traditional media are generally considered a more reliable source of information in times of crises, whereas social media platforms such as Facebook are perceived as less reliable. Yet, social media can play a positive role in crisis situations by mobilizing public participation and creating social support. In 2012, the American Red Cross (2012) published a study that sought to identify the extent to which American citizens used social media and mobile phones during a crisis and what they expected from emergency services. The advantages of using social networks during an emergency are in providing information and reporting in real time from the field to the general public, therefore they are perceived as support for established communication and not as a substitute. The American Red Cross employs “trusted volunteers” to support the official response through social media. Moreover, the more positive the attitude toward social media, the more people provide and obtain information from it in emergency and disaster situations. Despite the limitations of informal collaborative communication, citizens and emergency services recognize its importance (Dittus et al., 2017). In mass casualty incidents, there may be a time gap from the moment the incident becomes known until confirmation of the news of the loss of a loved one. Hunter (1983) called such a family a “family in waiting.” In the critical period when the family is already aware of the disaster but their loss has not yet been confirmed, the family “knows without knowing” about the fate of their loved one (Campbell & Demi, 2000). Once official confirmation is received, rituals that mark the beginning of the mourning process can begin (Boss, 2010), which includes broad social support for the bereaved family. Austin and colleagues (2012) noted the benefit that quick and readily available information offers in crisis situations for users and the community, fulfilling the need to provide assistance promptly, restore confidence, and give users a sense of control over the situation, thereby aiding in the restoration of homeostasis.

Bad news is regarded as a negative life event. Breaking bad news is an announcement about the death or serious injury of a loved one (Back et al., 2007). In the distant past, messages about a person’s death were passed on by word of mouth. With the development of society and technology, regular professional ethical

procedures and rules were established, applicable especially to the security forces and the medical system, aimed at delivering the tragic news with maximum responsibility and support for the families of the victims. Delivering tragic news has been defined as a professional activity that requires theoretical knowledge and professional skill (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2018), and it is taught in all medical training programs (Rosenzweig, 2012). Over the years, the health system has formulated the SPIKES protocol for delivering tragic news (Buckman, 2005). The protocol contains six steps: (a) preparing the context for delivering the news, including information about the event necessary details about the recipient of the tragic news; (b) understanding the recipients' perception of the event and of the level of information they want to receive without triggering their defense mechanisms; (c) engaging in a conversation and receiving permission to share information; (d) starting by providing a warning about the upcoming difficult information; (e) empathic acceptance of the recipients' reaction to the news; and (f) developing a program for the future. This protocol has been adapted to situations outside the health system, such as the welfare system. Every journalistic action begins with news about an event that constitutes new information of public interest. The closer the date and time of the occurrence is to publication, the greater the value of the news. Galtung and Ruge (1965) and subsequently Harcup and O'Neill (2001, 2017), described several variables that affect the publicizing of news, including an unexpected event and news of a negative nature, primarily when it involves people. Journalists continually seek to publish early. The more dramatic the event and interesting to a wider audience of readers, viewers, or listeners, the greater the importance of the time of publication and of the journalist who made it public (Joye et al., 2016). The term "red flag in the media" refers to a warning to journalists regarding the publication and distribution of news whose source is not clear, or about which there is a danger of ethical violation, mainly relating to life situations in a crisis, disasters, and wars (Carroll, 2020). "Red flag" describes the only "brake" that stops the publication of journalistic news of great interest, and it is raised when an ethical or legal limitation applies to the news.

Some legal restrictions are the result of external constraints, such as military censorship, but most restrictions originate from rules of ethics and journalistic ethical norms.

Fearn-Banks (2016) explained that, similar to the health system, the media also have a period known as the “golden hour,” which is the critical time when the skilled journalist is required to assemble all the available information and create a reliable and coherent report for the public. This parallels the urgency of immediate action during the first hour of an injury to a person’s health. With the introduction of social networks, the “golden hour” to distribute essential information in a reliable and orderly manner was reduced to “a few golden minutes” because of the speed of information dissemination on social networks and a change in the way the public uses the networks. The transition from institutionalized to social media or one that relies on the help of a computer raises ethical and practical questions that society must answer. Studies on the ethics of communication in crisis situations (McQuail, 2010) focus on several key issues: (a) **Accuracy and reliability**: the importance of transmitting accurate and reliable information becomes especially critical in crisis situations; publishing rumors that could induce panic and undermine trust in authorities must be avoided; (b) **balancing between revealing information and maintaining privacy** – it is important to consider how well the privacy of the people involved in the crisis is protected in relation to the public need for information. Exposing personal details of victims or patients in crisis situations, may harm them and their families; and (c) **involvement and responsibility** – reports in crisis situations require the media to address the possible consequences of revealing information. Delivering tragic news in a world of fast social communication raises significant ethical issues:

1. **Violation of privacy and human dignity**: In a world where information is propagated very quickly through social networks, it is easy to violate the privacy of families and relatives who have not yet been informed of a loss in a dignified and sensitive way. Spreading information about death or tragedy through social media before the family knows can be harmful and painful.

2. **Responsibility and professionalism:** When anyone can publish information, the distinction between professional sources and private individuals disappears. This creates a situation where it is difficult to know who is responsible for the accuracy and ethical implications of the information (Ward, 2019).

The case study at the heart of this research is a civil disaster that occurred in Israel when a group of 25 boys and girls were hiking in a riverbed in the desert. On that day there was a warning about the possibility of flash floods in the area. The flooding that the forecasters warned about did indeed occur, in April 2018, and led to the death of nine girls and one boy. The criminal responsibility for the disaster is still being debated in court, and has not been determined at the time of this writing, but the event has emotional, social, and media aspects that warrant an in-depth examination in light of the social responsibility in disseminating information about tragic news. The present study examined how the institutionalized and collaborative media worked in a civil mass casualty situation that included the bad news of loss of life. The study proposes different ways of conduct based on ethics, responsibility, and humanitarian commitment that respect the needs of the victims' families under circumstances where institutionalized and collaborative media operate simultaneously.

## **Methodology**

This qualitative research was based on a case study analysis according to the principles described by Robert Yin (2018) and other researchers (Hancock et al., 2021). In the first stage, we collected and organized data from news releases broadcasted on the radio by the Israel Broadcasting Corporation, and in parallel, we conducted in-depth interviews with people related to the event with various circles of closeness. After the data collection, we sorted, organized, and coded the data, so that each category represented a central theme or idea that appeared to recur. After coding, we compared the content and time sequences related to the regulatory model of delivering tragic news, as revealed in the analysis of the news releases compared with the testimony of the



interviewees. Interviews obtained from individuals from three different circles of closeness to the event allowed observation from different perspectives. The collection and analysis of the data enabled us to understand how the bad news spread in the institutionalized media vs. the social networks and mediated interpersonal communication.

### Research tools

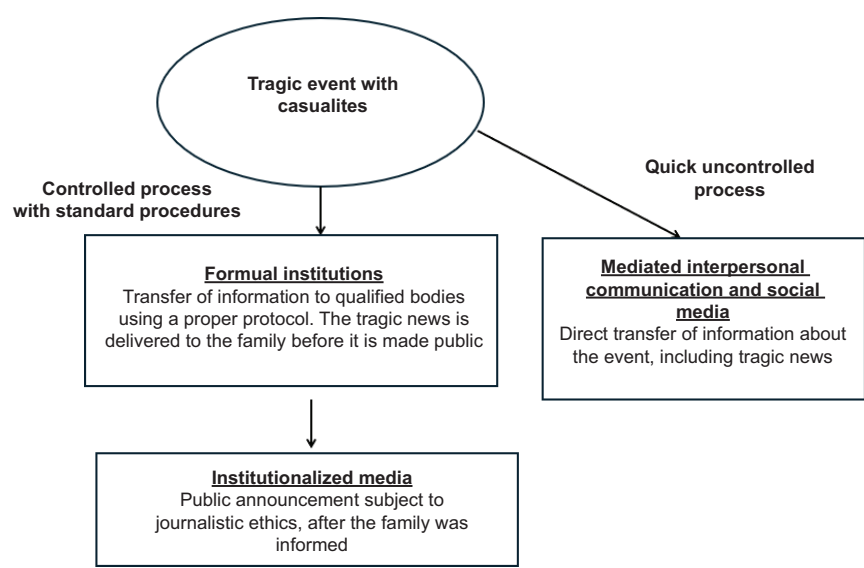
1. *Newscasts*. We analyzed 13 news items broadcast starting one hour after the disaster (2:00 PM) until the next morning (9:00 AM). We used content analysis of the news releases to examine the gradual process by which the information about the disaster and the victims was revealed.
2. *In-depth interviews*. We conducted 36 in-depth interviews with individuals in the first circles of proximity to the event. Interviewees may be divided into three circles of vulnerability: (a) youths from the group who were part of the event (4) and their friends from the same educational setting who did not go on the trip (4); (b) bereaved parents (4), parents of youths in the group who went on the trip but were saved (4), and members of the educational staff on the trip (8); and (c) people who were involved in various ways in the rescue operation or in treating the victims (12). We collected information from the interviewees about how they were exposed to the tragic news. The interviewees were contacted using the snowball method. The interviews began about four years after the disaster and were conducted over the course of a year. All the interviews were conducted jointly by the researchers and were recorded and transcribed with the express consent of the interviewees that the material in the interviews would be used for research purposes, without personally identifiable information.

The study received approval from the ethics committee of the academic institution where the first and third researchers work.



Findings

The process of delivering tragic news took place differently in the two types of communication. Whereas institutionalized media are usually careful in observing ethical rules and do not publish identifying details about the victims until receiving formal confirmation that the message was properly delivered to the families, on social networks, the information is distributed very quickly, without regulation or supervision. The process of delivering the tragic news in both institutional and informal media can be described using Figure 1:



**FIGURE 1** Process of delivering tragic news

In the test case described in the present study, it is possible to identify two stages along the axis of event management, from the moment the disaster occurred: (a) rescue and first item of information (b) formal identification, enabling the delivery of tragic news see Figure 2. The flood occurred at 13:17. The rescue phase lasted about an hour and a half, during which, all the survivors were pulled from the creek and given the opportunity to contact their parents. The first news in the institutionalized media was published at 15:00, after all the survivors had already been assembled

and nine of the ten bodies of the dead had already been recovered. Following the informal communication between the survivors and their families, ten families remained whose children did not make contact after the event. Some of the parents of the victims received the first news from the institutionalized media in the 15:00 newscast or from the informal media, when a close person called to tell them about the news report of the event. All the parents said that their first action was to try to establish direct contact with their children. Since this connection was not made, the level of threat and anxiety about the fate of the children increased, but some parents still believed that the connection would soon be made. The anxiety about the fate of the children increased as time passed and the connection was not established. At 16:00 all the parents of the dead already knew that a disaster had happened but did not know what was the fate of their child.

The first informal identification of nine of the ten dead youths was made within two hours after the disaster. The bodies were sent for formal identification to the National Center of Forensic Medicine, and during this time, which lasted about three hours, the news was conveyed through the police to all the local authorities in the places where the families resided. Delivery of the notification to the families included the information that their child was not among the survivors but identification was required in a formal procedure, for which the parents were asked to come to the National Center of Forensic Medicine. A long time passed from the moment the disaster became known until the families received the official announcement of the tragic news. One of the families, whose daughter was considered missing until the body was found at 11:00 p.m., had to wait for the formal identification until five in the morning the next day, about 16 hours after the event. For many hours, each family faced the fear alone, unsure if the worst had happened, without receiving the official notification that confirmed it. This time was characterized by intensive institutionalized and collaborative media updates, with disparities in information regarding the various victims, which caused chaos, ambiguity, acute anxiety, and rumors. Information spread in an uncontrolled manner, mainly by collaborative media. How did the institutionalized and collaborative media work along the timeline

from the moment of the disaster until the announcement of the tragic news?

### **Publicizing information in institutionalized media**

The flood occurred at 13:17 and lasted for about ten minutes. The rescue time of the group of youths who found a hiding place in a crevice a little above the stream was less than an hour. The position of some of the group members who were at a point above the stream, and of the boys who managed to escape the flood on the banks of the stream, allowed them to observe immediately and unexpectedly the tragic results of the disaster, although they lacked information about the number of casualties. The established media (news releases) provided cautious information about both the event and the victims to the public: at first, the information was vague and unclear, then focused, including names and personal details. The media maintained the rules of journalistic ethics, and the information was published after the details were verified by authorized officials. In the news report at 14:00, nothing said about the event. At this time, citizens were already spreading the news in the collaborative media and the institutionalized media had already been updated about the event. The first report about the disaster was made in the 15:00 news, almost two hours after it occurred. In this newscast, the media maintained the ambiguity, reporting only the successful rescue and not mentioning the victims. The 16:00 news reported an incident with many casualties but avoided using the words ‘disaster’ and ‘perished’. In retrospect, it can be said that at this time, the institutionalized media already had accurate knowledge of the number of dead and injured but still chose to provide vague information about the number of victims, pending confirmation that the families had been updated. In the 17:00 news, seven youths were described as being in critical condition. The public knows that the term “critical condition” is used to describe a disaster in which people lost their lives, but the news had not yet been delivered to the families. At this time, there was already complete clarity about the total number of youths involved in the event, including the number of those located and rescued and of those who died. The 18:00 news opened with the exact number of the victims and the media still reported their condition

as critical. At this time, about five hours after the flood occurred, all the families were notified that a member of their family was involved in the incident, but the formal delivery of the tragic news had not yet been completed.

The first report of deaths was given only during the news at 19:00. The message did not include the names of the dead and gave only general information. The established media was still waiting for the official acknowledgment that all the families had received the tragic news but by now, the names of the deceased had already been distributed in the collaborative media (phones and social networks). During the 21:00 news, the names of the fatalities were still not announced, but the number of dead in the event was already definitively announced. The identification process at the National Center of Forensic Medicine had not yet been completed. At 22:00, the name of the first girl who perished was released for publication, and at 23:00 the names of five more were reported. In the course of the night, additional names of those who perished in the disaster were released for publication, and by 10:00 am the names of eight out of ten dead had already been published and the announcement of funeral times began. The complete details of the event were revealed in stages over the course of 18 hours. The event opened all the news broadcasts, and new details were added each time. The institutionalized media did not deviate from the ethical guidelines it had adopted and kept the complete information about the casualties under wraps until receiving official confirmation that the families had been informed and that the information about the disaster could be made public.

### **Dissemination of information in collaborative media**

In parallel with the reports in the institutionalized media, information began to flow in the collaborative media see Figure 3. The in-depth interviews we conducted revealed how the rumors about the disaster spread and how personal details of those who perished were disclosed. The in-depth interviews were conducted with people from various circles of closeness to the event: students who were at the scene of the disaster, their friends who remained at the educational institution in Tel Aviv, parents whose children were

saved and who received an update from them, and bereaved parents. Below we will present the evidence obtained from the interviews, describing the information that passed through the informal communication channels and the sequence of time that passed from the moment of the incident to receiving the tragic news.

### ***Youths at the disaster scene***

Four of the interviewees belonged to the group of youths who were at the scene of the event: two girls who were away from the hiking track and two boys who were in the stream and managed to climb to higher ground, where they waited for rescue. The girls who were waiting outside the riverbed told of “a flood” of phone calls from the moment of the disaster: “The whole country already knew, the phones didn’t stop ringing: my mother, my uncles, the police chief in my town.” (1) “My phone was one of the phones listed on the page the parents received before the trip. My phone didn’t stop ringing for I don’t know how many hours, didn’t stop, didn’t stop ringing.” (2) The two testimonies of the rescued youths came to us from their parents who reported the first conversation with the boys still in the process of rescue: “Mom’ I’m in the helicopter. Mom, there were people killed there, I saw bodies.” (4) It seems that although there was no delivery of tragic news, in practice the entire group that was rescued was exposed to the actual disaster as it took place and to its results. The group that was rescued at the scene of the disaster was brought to one of the nearby settlements. One of the fathers who managed to reach the place urged the instructors to properly deliver the tragic news to the surviving boys and girls, “At some point, they started to announce in the media that there had been casualties. I grab the instructors and tell them that it’s no longer possible to hide this information because it will be made public soon, and we need to get them together, share with them, and let them speak.” (5) The father’s account indicates that for the group of youths who were there, the announcements in the media were a decisive catalyst for delivering the tragic news, and to a large extent, the “time-line” of the official announcements required the instructors to formally inform the youths of what they had already known for nine hours.

### ***Youths remaining at the educational institution in Tel Aviv***

As soon as word of the disaster became known to the staff working with the students, an attempt was made to get them all together. The students arranged three television sets in the central room, each tuned to a different channel to try to extract every shred of information. The desire to immediately act and help led to the decision to send an instructor and two students to the hospital in the South. These students were exposed to information without proper control: "On our way we received many, many messages, and many people called to ask how we were doing... At the hospital we were told that Yaeli was dead and so was Adi... and that there was nothing to be done. I slowly understood the magnitude of the disaster. I returned to the educational institution and remained in a separate room on the side, so that my friends in the program wouldn't learn from me what I already knew." (6) The faculty were aware of the importance of properly delivering the difficult news to maintain the students' trust and enable appropriate support. Yet, this desire contradicted the police order to prevent announcement until formal approval was obtained. In practice, the students were exposed to information circulating on social networks: "A friend from another educational institution called, and somehow she learned that Yaeli had been killed before we were informed. At this stage, we didn't yet know that there were casualties from our academy. I hung up on her. Like, I didn't want to hear it from her like that." (7)

### ***Parents whose children were saved***

One of the fathers, who had been released from a lengthy military service career a short time before the incident, said that his daughter called him, distraught, a little after 1:00 p.m. Crying, she said that she was at an observation point above the river with a friend and an instructor, and the youths who were in the riverbed were hit by a flood. The father called his friends in the army and was told that the army had already received the message and was preparing for action. The father was in contact with his daughter over the phone every few minutes to reassure her, as he was being updated on the operation by the army. Some parents received the messages in the opposite order, starting with their child calling to

reassure them and only later being exposed to the news and details of the disaster by the media. One of the mothers received a call from a friend who informed her that her son was seen on television when the survivors were filmed; she was completely unaware of the event before that call. Another call a few minutes later came from an unknown phone, and her son, with the noise of a helicopter in the background, summarized in two sentences the traumatic sight he was exposed to and his rescue. The parents' description attests to the strength of the pervasive and diverse communication networks that operated intensively during the disaster, spreading information in all directions without a structured and regulated control system.

### ***Bereaved parents***

Receiving the tragic news upsets the lives of the bereaved families. The delivery of the tragic message to the bereaved parents was described in all the interviews as a dramatic moment when the life of the family was suddenly divided into life up to the disaster and life thereafter. Despite the time that has passed since the disaster, the description of that day was given in great detail, as if attempting to create order and continuity amid chaos and fracture.

I was at home. My father called me and said: "Turn on the TV quickly, there's something, some group in the south." I'm the first mother to have seen it on TV. I called [daughter's name] around three and she didn't answer, and neither did the instructor. My feeling at that moment, when I was alone, was that this is it, this is the end of the world for me. (9)

The testimonies of the other families also described how the information reached them through the media and how they tried to use it as a central channel to obtain information:

The news about students caught in the stream came from our son's friend who called at a quarter past four. She heard an announcement on the radio about youths who had been swept away and knew he was on a trip. She sent an emergency phone number. The number was busy for four hours. We started calling friends and our daughter. Each engaged 10 people and gradually 100 or 200 people tried to come up with a shred of information. They all wanted our good, it was my



request, but no one really knew. When I realized that the wounded were arriving at a hospital in the south, we decided to go there. There was a list of the wounded and I was told that he was not on it. A social worker in charge who was there gave us the tragic news and told us to go and identify our son at the forensic center. (10)

Another mother described how the house started to fill up with people without them understanding why. No one could say what happened. The police officers who were supposed to deliver the message to the parents could not find the address, and the social workers of the local authority arrived at the house under the assumption that the parents had already been given the tragic news. After that, the parents were asked to go to the forensic center, allegedly to supply the DNA for identification: “We were such a mess. We didn’t have a clue. We were told that there was a group of survivors, but it was impossible to get in touch with them.” (11) The family’s uncertainty in the absence of knowledge continued even at the Center of Forensic Medicine, where there was no Internet connection:

“Every second I turn to the police officers and investigators and ask what’s going on and they tell me ‘we don’t know.’ There was another social worker there, she told me it was excellent that they didn’t find her because she’s probably sitting on a rock somewhere. That’s what we wanted to believe.” (11) The findings show how the collaborative media lacks control mechanisms and how the news being disseminated spreads like wildfire, as opposed to the institutionalized media that is committed to the code of ethics of the Press Council (Aguirre, 2020). The experience of chaos faced by the people who are closest to the tragedy is described as great suffering on the part of the families, which added to the great pain of the tragic event.

## Discussion

Disasters in which there is a danger of possible harm to people arouse an immediate need to receive information, especially in the families whose relatives may be at the scene of the event and be harmed. In such situations, the families strive to obtain information as quickly as possible. Because the institutionalized media is required to verify news, which delays publication, the public turns

to social networks to obtain information immediately. Thus, traditional means of communication play a secondary role to social networks, where information and messages are often transmitted in real time (Cronin, 2023). The technological developments of the last decades, such as the emergence of online social network platforms, presented journalists with new ethical challenges in their professional work. Journalists and media companies had to adapt to the pace of publication on online social networks (Mateus, 2015). A study conducted on the war in Ukraine found that social networks such as Telegram and Facebook were often the initial source of news that was later broadcast in the institutionalized media. Many Ukrainian citizens (65.5%) choose Telegram as a main channel for news consumption because of its availability and the possibility of direct and unfiltered content distribution (Nazaruk, 2022). Television and other mass media channels still maintain their status as a main source of news consumption, but during an ongoing crisis (e.g., war), citizens seek to turn to new channels and diversify the sources of information available to them (Lev-On & Uziel, 2018).

From the moment a mass casualty event occurs until receiving the personal news about the family member involved in the event, the family is in a state known in the literature as “ambiguous loss” (Boss, 2010), in which the families try to obtain all possible information from the formal and informal media. This issue has been extensively researched in the context of families of captives and missing persons (Author 1 & colleague, 2015). The innovation in the present study is about the period of ambiguous loss in which families of victims of a civil disaster find themselves, in connection with the role of the media in reducing the extent of this period. During difficult events, such as natural disasters and emergencies, there is a danger of spreading rumors (Huang et al., 2015). Because of the lack of accurate information and clarity about the event, people tend to fill in the gaps by creating their own versions of it (Oh et al., 2013). From this point of view, it is possible to learn about the social needs that exist in times of disaster and to understand how the information is collected from the collaborative media, to be transmitted under the responsibility and guidance of a person with experience working with the institutionalized media

(Mendoza et al., 2010). Studies indicate that social media can play an important role in helping people stay informed and connected in times of disaster, but it is important to be aware of the potential for misinformation and to use collaborative communication responsibly (Thomson et al., 2012). Reports in the collaborative media that are considered more reliable are supplied by people who were close to the heart of the event (Samory & Mitra, 2018). Despite the high level of reliability of the information coming from people who were in proximity to the event, it should be remembered that in most cases, reports received from people in the field are affected by their emotional experience and by anxiety resulting from closeness to the incident (Huang et al., 2015). The development of social networks has led to ethical dilemmas and the need to balance the speed of publishing with the reliability of published content, especially in the era of post-truth and disinformation. The immediacy and wide distribution of social media are liable to increase the effect of negative news delivery, requiring careful consideration of ethical guidelines and individual self-regulation. The absence of filtering on the Internet may result in spreading misinformation. Among the ethical challenges that arise in the digital age, is the influence of social networks on the way we treat and handle information related to human life. Eid (2009) argued that social networks add a new dimension to ethical discussions regarding communication and the media. He called for the development of awareness and ethical tools that account for the effect of the new media on the lives of individuals and society at large. Within this framework, he proposed to redefine the guidelines for journalistic responsibility in the digital environment, to ensure that the publication of personal and sensitive details is done morally and properly. In the disaster we investigated, some of the youths witnessed what happened, and although they could not know all the details, they had an almost complete picture of the scale of the disaster and its details immediately after the event. They shared this information with friends in the collaborative media. The research findings show the long time lag between receiving the first information about the event and the confirmation of tragic news. The study indicates that the difficulty lies not only in this gap but also in the information available in the collaborative media to which the

families are exposed. In previous studies, researchers have identified the opportunities and challenges of integrating collaborative media, including social networks, in crisis response management. Reuter and Spielhofer (2017) found that citizens use social networks during an emergency to obtain information about the event and that the attitudes of the participants regarding the use of social networks were generally positive. A study conducted in Germany found that social networks were used in emergencies more to search for information than to share feelings (Reuter & Kaufhold, 2018). Although in the past there was a tendency to attribute negative characteristics to collaborative media, today the perception of end users has changed, and they consider collaborative media to be an important source of information. The present study shed light on the time gap between the dissemination of information on social networks and mediated interpersonal communication on one hand (see Figure 1), and the publication of information in traditional media on the other (see Figure 2). It also pointed out the importance of the period during which families are in a state of anxiety about the fate of their loved ones in the absence of information about them. While the institutionalized media adhered to the rules of ethics and waited with the announcement of the tragic news until the families received them in a proper manner, on social networks the flow of information was unsupervised and information was disseminated in violation of moral norms and protocols for delivering tragic news.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Adhering to a code of ethics in reporting about victims of disaster is essential for ensuring respect for the victims and empathy toward their families. Without regulation, the rise of social networks is liable to increase the influence of ill-judged dissemination of unreliable negative news. All solutions concerning information must respect ethical principles that balance privacy with the public's desire to receive information. Despite its open and free nature, shared communication is now an integral part of reality, as evidenced by the fact that today's emergency services tend to see it as a useful and effective means of conveying messages in an emergency. At the same time, there is a clear need to develop

supervision and control mechanisms. These can be designed in several ways:

1. Development of a civil/social ethical code to guide the creation of social moral norms according to which citizens acting as “journalists from the field” must do so with the appreciation of the importance of information dissemination in emergency and disaster situations, especially in relation to tragic news, and of showing respect for the victims and their families. The involvement of the general public is important for the development of a critical attitude and media literacy.
2. Training citizens active on social networks to monitor offensive information, fake news, and disinformation.
3. Preparation of a protocol that guides the establishment of immediate contact between the survivors and the families, after which it prevents the survivors and the rescue teams from using collaborative communication until the formal delivery of the tragic news. Members of the rescue team and first responders should work with dedicated incident phones and turn off their personal phones during an incident. Survivors should be instructed to hand over their phones after being explained the rationale for doing so. Care must be taken to generate authorized messages and distribute them through social networks.

The development of an educational civic system predicated on a value-based, social, and psychological understanding that works simultaneously in the institutionalized and the informal media cannot prevent mass disaster events. It can, however, constitute a joint, agreed upon, and humane response to the dissemination of information about tragic news that should help reduce the duration of ambiguous loss. The main conclusion emerging from the present study concerns the need to treat ethics in social networks not only as a technical or legal issue but also as part of the moral obligation of everyone who uses and creates content in the digital space.

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