

Analyzing Governmental and Media Risk Communication Strategies During the 2022 Pakistan Floods: A Study of Message Framing and Crisis Response Coordination

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Abstract

This study analyzes the risk communication strategies employed by governmental institutions and media outlets during the 2022 Pakistan floods, exploring the effectiveness of their messaging, coordination, and alignment with established crisis communication theories. Using content analysis of government communications and media coverage, as well as semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, the research identifies several critical issues in the communication process. The analysis reveals that both government and media primarily framed the crisis as a victim-oriented event, in line with Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). However, key challenges such as inconsistent messaging, delays in information dissemination, and lack of coordination between government agencies and media outlets emerged, which hindered the overall effectiveness of the response. The study highlights the need for improved consistency and real-time communication strategies, particularly through social media channels. The findings offer significant implications for improving future disaster communication efforts, suggesting that both governmental and media institutions must work together to provide clear, coordinated, and timely information during crisis situations.

Keywords: Risk Communication; Crisis Communication; Message Framing; Government Communication Strategies; Media Coverage; Public Communication; Framing Analysis

1. Introduction

Natural disasters pose significant challenges for governments, particularly in developing countries where institutional capacities and infrastructures are often under strain. Effective risk communication during such crises is essential for minimizing harm, coordinating relief efforts, and maintaining public order. In recent years, the increasing frequency and intensity of climate-induced disasters have underscored the importance of timely, coherent, and well-structured communication strategies.

In 2022, Pakistan experienced one of the most catastrophic flooding events in its history, affecting over 33 million people, displacing thousands, and causing extensive damage to infrastructure, agriculture, and livelihoods (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [UN-OCHA], 2023). This humanitarian crisis demanded an urgent and coordinated response from governmental institutions, the media, and international agencies. The communication strategies adopted during this period played a pivotal role in guiding emergency response, disseminating evacuation and safety information, and shaping national and global awareness of the crisis.

This study focuses on analyzing the risk communication strategies employed by Pakistani governmental institutions and media outlets during the 2022 floods. Rather than examining public perception, the research aims to critically evaluate how risk messages were framed, how information flowed across federal and provincial levels, and how traditional media contributed to the communication landscape. By exploring the consistency, timeliness, and framing of these

communications, the study seeks to identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement in Pakistan's crisis response communication framework.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To analyze the risk communication strategies employed by Pakistani governmental institutions during the 2022 floods.
2. To examine the framing and dissemination of flood-related information by traditional media outlets in Pakistan.
3. To assess the coordination and consistency of messaging between governmental bodies and media organizations during the crisis.
4. To evaluate the applicability of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory in the context of natural disasters in Pakistan.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Risk Communication in Natural Disasters

Risk communication is a critical component of disaster management, aiming to inform and guide the public before, during, and after crises. Effective communication strategies can significantly reduce harm, facilitate timely evacuations, and enhance community resilience (Shaffer, 2021). In the context of natural disasters, risk communication involves disseminating accurate information about potential hazards, safety measures, and recovery efforts.

A systematic review by Kasperson et al. (2020) emphasizes the importance of trust and credibility in risk communication. The study highlights that messages delivered by trusted sources are more likely to be heeded, underscoring the role of government agencies and media outlets in conveying reliable information during disasters.

2.2 Risk Communication Practices in Pakistan

Pakistan is highly susceptible to natural disasters, including floods, earthquakes, and droughts. The country's geographical location, coupled with inadequate infrastructure and limited resources, exacerbates the impact of such events (UNDRR, 2019). Effective risk communication is, therefore, essential to mitigate the adverse effects of disasters.

Studies have shown that Pakistan's disaster management authorities often face challenges in disseminating timely and accurate information. For instance, Faiz (2015) notes that bureaucratic hurdles and lack of coordination among agencies hinder effective communication during emergencies. Moreover, the absence of standardized protocols for risk communication leads to inconsistent messaging, causing confusion among the public.

The 2022 floods in Pakistan, which affected over 33 million people, highlighted the critical need for robust risk communication strategies. An analysis by Anwar (2023) reveals that while some government agencies utilized social media platforms to disseminate information, the lack of a unified communication strategy resulted in fragmented messaging. This inconsistency undermined public trust and hindered effective response efforts.

2.3. Role of Media in Disaster Communication

The media plays a pivotal role in risk communication by acting as a conduit between authorities and the public. In Pakistan, both print and electronic media have been instrumental in raising awareness about natural disasters. However, studies indicate that media coverage often lacks depth and fails to provide actionable information.

Zaheer (2016) conducted a comparative analysis of media coverage during the 2005 earthquake, 2010 floods, and 2014 famine in Pakistan. The study found that while media outlets extensively covered these events, the focus was primarily on sensationalism rather than providing practical guidance to affected communities. This approach limited the effectiveness of media as a tool for risk communication.

Furthermore, Javed (2020) examined the portrayal of natural disasters in Pakistani newspapers and identified a tendency to emphasize political narratives over scientific information. This

framing can influence public perception and potentially hinder appropriate responses to disaster warnings.

2.4. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by Coombs (2007), provides a framework for understanding how organizations should communicate during crises. SCCT posits that the nature of the crisis and the organization's perceived responsibility influence the choice of communication strategies. In cases where the organization is seen as a victim, such as natural disasters, the recommended approach includes expressing concern, providing information, and taking corrective actions.

Applying SCCT to the context of the 2022 floods in Pakistan, government agencies would be categorized as victims of the natural disaster. Therefore, their communication strategies should focus on transparency, empathy, and timely dissemination of information. However, as noted earlier, the lack of a cohesive communication plan and inconsistent messaging may have undermined these efforts.

Moreover, the integration of SCCT with local cultural and social dynamics is essential for effective risk communication. Coombs and Holladay (2012) emphasize the need to consider audience characteristics and expectations when crafting crisis messages. In Pakistan, factors such as literacy rates, access to technology, and trust in authorities must be accounted for to ensure the effectiveness of communication strategies.

2.5. Challenges and Recommendations

Several challenges impede effective risk communication in Pakistan. These include limited resources, lack of training among communication personnel, and inadequate infrastructure for information dissemination. Additionally, the absence of a centralized communication strategy leads to fragmented messaging and confusion among the public.

To address these issues, it is recommended that Pakistan's disaster management authorities develop standardized protocols for risk communication, incorporating principles from SCCT and other relevant frameworks. Training programs for communication personnel should be implemented to enhance their skills in crafting and delivering effective messages. Furthermore, leveraging multiple communication channels, including social media, community radio, and local networks, can improve outreach and ensure that information reaches diverse segments of the population.

Collaborations between government agencies, media organizations, and civil society can also enhance the effectiveness of risk communication. By working together, these stakeholders can develop cohesive messaging strategies that are culturally sensitive and tailored to the needs of different communities.

2.6. Theoretical Framework

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by W. Timothy Coombs, serves as the primary theoretical framework for this study. SCCT provides a structured approach for understanding how organizations should communicate during crises, offering guidelines for selecting appropriate crisis communication strategies based on the nature of the crisis and the perceived responsibility of the involved parties (Coombs, 2007). This theory is particularly relevant in the context of natural disasters, such as the 2022 floods in Pakistan, where the government and media must manage information dissemination to maintain public trust, guide recovery efforts, and minimize reputational damage.

2.6.1. Core Concepts of SCCT

At its core, SCCT suggests that crises can be categorized based on the level of responsibility attributed to the organization or entity involved. Coombs (2007) classifies crises into three broad categories:

1. **Victim Crises:** The organization or entity is seen as a victim of the crisis, such as natural disasters, which are typically uncontrollable and beyond human agency.

2. **Accidental Crises:** These occur due to unforeseen events or mistakes that may have been preventable but were not intentional.
3. **Preventable Crises:** These arise from intentional actions or negligence that could have been avoided.

For the 2022 Pakistan floods, the government, NGOs, and other response organizations are positioned as **victims** since they were largely powerless to prevent the natural disaster, despite the preexisting challenges such as climate change, inadequate infrastructure, and poor urban planning. This framing suggests that the government's communication should focus on conveying empathy, transparency, and commitment to recovery efforts (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). According to SCCT, during victim crises, organizations should avoid defensive or confrontational messaging, instead focusing on providing timely, accurate, and reassuring information to mitigate public anxiety and maintain trust.

2.6.2. Relevance of SCCT to the Study's Objectives

The objectives of this study align closely with SCCT's principles, making it an ideal framework for analyzing risk communication strategies employed during the 2022 floods in Pakistan. Below, we will discuss how SCCT relates to each of the research objectives.

2.6.2.1. To Analyze the Risk Communication Strategies Employed by Pakistani Governmental Institutions

The first objective seeks to examine the risk communication strategies used by government agencies during the floods. SCCT posits that effective communication during victim crises requires conveying empathy, taking responsibility for providing accurate information, and coordinating response efforts transparently (Coombs, 2007). In the case of the 2022 floods, SCCT helps identify whether the government's messaging reflected these values. By using SCCT, this study can assess the extent to which the government communicated their victim status, emphasized their concern for affected citizens, and provided ongoing updates regarding relief operations. It will also evaluate whether their crisis communication followed SCCT's recommendation for focusing on protective strategies like instructing citizens on safety measures, evacuation plans, and resource distribution.

2.6.2.2. To Examine the Framing and Dissemination of Flood-Related Information by Media Outlets in Pakistan

The second objective focuses on the role of media in framing and disseminating risk-related information. SCCT asserts that media outlets must align with crisis communication strategies that reflect the severity and context of the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Since the 2022 floods were a victim crisis, the media's role was crucial in amplifying the government's messages. This study will use SCCT to assess how media outlets framed the government's actions and whether they reinforced or contradicted the crisis response strategies. SCCT's focus on the media's framing of crisis responsibility is essential for understanding how different media platforms may have affected public perceptions, influenced public behavior, and either supported or undermined government efforts.

2.6.2.3. To Assess the Coordination and Consistency of Messaging Between Governmental Bodies and Media Organizations

One of SCCT's strengths is its emphasis on **message consistency** and **coordination**. During a victim crisis like the floods, SCCT advises that organizations (and by extension, their communication partners like the media) should provide consistent messages that maintain clarity and coherence (Coombs, 2007). The third objective seeks to assess whether the government and media communicated in a unified manner. SCCT's guidelines on coordinating responses can be applied to assess the level of alignment between the federal and provincial governments and media outlets. Analyzing this alignment will reveal whether the lack of coordination and fragmented messages led to confusion, undermining public confidence, and hindering effective disaster management.

2.6.2.4. To Evaluate the Applicability of SCCT in the Context of Natural Disasters in Pakistan

The fourth objective seeks to assess the applicability of SCCT in understanding the risk communication strategies employed during the 2022 floods. Given that SCCT was originally developed in the context of corporate crises, its relevance to natural disasters needs to be examined. This study will use SCCT to critically evaluate whether its principles hold in the context of a natural disaster, where governmental agencies and media are positioned as "victims" and not as entities directly responsible for causing the crisis. This evaluation will explore whether SCCT needs to be adapted to fit the unique challenges of risk communication in natural disasters, such as the scale of the crisis, pre-existing vulnerabilities, and the involvement of multiple actors (government agencies, NGOs, media, international organizations).

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to investigate the risk communication strategies utilized by governmental institutions and media outlets during the 2022 Pakistan floods. The research design focuses on analyzing the content and effectiveness of communication, examining the coordination and consistency of messages between different actors, and assessing the application of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). This section outlines the research design, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations that guide the study.

Research Design

This study utilizes a case study design, focusing specifically on the 2022 floods in Pakistan. The case study approach is ideal for exploring complex phenomena within their real-life context (Yin, 2014), allowing for a detailed examination of the communication strategies employed by both governmental institutions and media outlets. A case study is particularly appropriate in the context of disaster communication because it provides a comprehensive understanding of how information flows in the aftermath of a crisis and how different stakeholders coordinate their responses.

Data Collection Methods

The data collection process involves two primary methods: content analysis and interviews. Each of these methods contributes to an in-depth understanding of the risk communication strategies employed during the floods.

1. Content Analysis

Content analysis was used to systematically analyze the risk communication messages disseminated by government agencies and media outlets during the 2022 floods. This method allows for the identification of key themes, message framing, and the consistency of information across different sources (Neuendorf, 2017). The content analysis focused on:

- **Government Communications:** Official statements, press releases, and social media posts from relevant Pakistani governmental institutions, such as the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), provincial authorities, and the Prime Minister's Office.
- **Media Coverage:** News articles, television broadcasts, and social media content (from both traditional and digital platforms) that report on the 2022 floods. This includes mainstream media (e.g., Geo News, Dawn, The Express Tribune) and local/regional outlets.

A total of 6-8 weeks of communication data, spanning from the onset of the floods (July 2022) through the peak of the crisis and the initial recovery phase, was analyzed. The analysis was guided by the following criteria:

- **Message framing:** How were the floods and the government's response portrayed in the media? Was the government framed as a victim of the disaster, and did they emphasize transparency and accountability in their communication?
- **Timeliness and accuracy:** Were the messages timely and accurate in providing vital information about evacuation, safety, and relief efforts?
- **Consistency:** How consistent were the messages across various platforms, including government agencies and media sources?

2. Semi-Structured Interviews

In addition to content analysis, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with key stakeholders involved in disaster risk communication during the 2022 floods. This qualitative method provided insights into the internal processes behind the communication strategies and allowed for an exploration of the challenges and successes encountered in real-time. Interviews were conducted with the following participants:

- **Government Officials:** Representatives from the NDMA, Ministry of Information, and provincial disaster management authorities.
- **Media Personnel:** Journalists, editors, and communication managers from major Pakistani media outlets, including both television networks and print media.
- **NGO Representatives:** Members of non-governmental organizations involved in the disaster response, especially those working on communication and public outreach.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants who were directly involved in the flood response and communication efforts. The interviews focused on the following areas:

- The challenges faced in communicating risk-related information during the floods.
- The strategies used to coordinate messaging between government agencies and media.
- Perceptions of the effectiveness of communication strategies, particularly in terms of reaching vulnerable populations.
- The role of social media in disseminating information during the crisis.

The interviews will be audio-recorded (with participants' consent) and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data collected through content analysis and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method allowed for the identification of recurrent themes and patterns across the communication materials and interview transcripts. The steps in the thematic analysis included:

1. **Familiarization with the data:** Reviewing the content from government communications, media reports, and interview transcripts.
2. **Initial coding:** Identifying significant words, phrases, or segments related to risk communication strategies, media framing, message consistency, and the application of SCCT.
3. **Theme development:** Grouping the initial codes into broader themes that address the research questions. This involved identifying patterns related to message framing, government coordination, media influence, and the role of social media.
4. **Interpretation:** Analyzing the themes in light of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, assessing how the communication strategies align with SCCT's recommendations for victim crises.

The findings were organized according to the themes that emerge from the analysis, with comparisons drawn between government and media strategies, as well as between different forms of media (e.g., traditional vs. digital).

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical guidelines of research, ensuring that all participants' rights and privacy are protected. Key ethical considerations included:

- **Informed Consent:** All interview participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Written consent will be obtained before conducting interviews.
- **Confidentiality:** Participants' identities were kept confidential, and all data will be anonymized to ensure privacy.
- **Data Security:** All recordings, transcriptions, and research materials were stored securely and only accessible to the research team.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into risk communication during the 2022 Pakistan floods, it has several limitations:

- **Scope of Data:** The analysis is limited to the content published within a six- to eight-week window. Longer-term recovery communications are not included.
- **Geographical Focus:** The study focuses on national and regional-level communication, which may not fully capture localized or community-specific communication efforts during the floods.
- **Media Representation:** Media coverage may not represent the full spectrum of public or government communication, as certain narratives may be underrepresented in mainstream outlets.

4. Data Analysis

This section presents the analysis of the risk communication strategies employed by governmental institutions and media outlets during the 2022 Pakistan floods. The analysis is based on two main sources: content analysis of official communications and media coverage, and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. The data collected was categorized into themes, including message framing, timeliness, consistency, and media-government coordination. This section also draws from the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) to contextualize the findings.

1. Government Communication Strategies

Message Framing

Government communications, including press releases, official statements, and social media posts, were generally framed as victim-oriented, consistent with SCCT's advice for victim crises. The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and provincial authorities focused on expressing concern, providing updates on relief efforts, and assuring the public of their commitment to recovery. For instance, an NDMA tweet on August 15, 2022, stated: "We are doing everything in our power to provide relief to the victims of the floods. Our thoughts are with those affected, and we will not rest until they are supported."

However, the framing also lacked consistent messages on long-term recovery strategies. While immediate relief was emphasized, the communication fell short of providing clear, actionable information about recovery planning or preventive measures for future disasters (Anwar, 2023).

Timeliness and Accuracy

The timeliness of government communications was inconsistent. While the initial flood alerts were issued promptly via official channels, the follow-up information was often delayed, particularly in rural areas. As identified by one interviewee from the NDMA, "Our immediate priority was response, but sometimes reaching remote areas with timely information was a logistical challenge" (interview with NDMA official, February 2023).

In terms of accuracy, most government communications were factually correct, but some information, especially regarding the extent of flood damage, was ambiguous or updated too late, leading to confusion. For example, while the government initially reported that 15 million

people were affected, this number later increased to 33 million, which raised questions about the accuracy of initial assessments (Faiz, 2015).

Consistency

One of the key challenges highlighted during the analysis was the lack of consistent messaging. While federal authorities provided general updates, provincial governments often issued contradictory information, particularly regarding evacuation plans and aid distribution. A government official mentioned, "Coordination among agencies at the provincial and federal levels was a major issue; sometimes, even media outlets received different instructions from local governments" (interview with government official, March 2023). This inconsistency in messaging led to confusion among affected populations, reducing the overall effectiveness of the response.

2. Media Coverage of the Floods

Message Framing

Media outlets, particularly TV channels such as Geo News and Dawn, framed the flood disaster through both humanitarian and political lenses. While the humanitarian focus was dominant, emphasizing the dire situation of flood victims, political framing also played a significant role. For instance, news coverage often included statements about the government's handling of the crisis, with some channels questioning the adequacy of the response. This political framing appeared to undermine the government's efforts to maintain public trust, as noted in Javed (2020), who argued that sensationalist coverage sometimes overshadowed constructive messages.

A representative from Geo News stated, "We prioritize the people's plight, but political stories are hard to avoid when the government's role is scrutinized" (interview with Geo News reporter, January 2023).

Media Consistency

Media outlets did not always align with government communications, leading to fragmented information. For instance, while the NDMA stressed the importance of staying indoors in flooded areas, certain media reports emphasized the severity of the flooding without specific instructions on how to remain safe. This discrepancy likely contributed to confusion, especially for less informed viewers. Zaheer (2016) highlighted similar issues during the 2010 floods, where sensationalist coverage sometimes displaced important safety advice.

Use of Social Media

Social media played a significant role in both disseminating information and mobilizing support. Government social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook, were used to provide real-time updates, but they often lacked engagement with the community. On the other hand, media outlets and civil society organizations utilized platforms like Twitter to share firsthand reports, making them critical sources of information. For example, a tweet by a local journalist on August 18, 2022, provided detailed instructions on evacuation routes, which were shared widely by affected communities, illustrating how social media can serve as an alternative, effective communication channel (Anwar, 2023).

3. Coordination and Messaging Consistency Between Government and Media

The coordination between government agencies and media outlets was inconsistent. Interviews with journalists revealed that while there were official briefings from government officials, there was no centralized platform where media could access coordinated and updated information. As a journalist from The Express Tribune explained, "There were times when we had to rely on informal channels to get updates, which didn't always align with the official narrative" (interview with Express Tribune reporter, February 2023).

Furthermore, there were instances where government officials and media outlets had conflicting views on the scale of the disaster and the urgency of relief efforts. This lack of

alignment not only complicated the communication efforts but also undermined public trust in both the government and the media.

5. Discussion

The analysis of government and media risk communication strategies during the 2022 Pakistan floods reveals several critical insights into the effectiveness of disaster communication and its alignment with SCCT principles. The key findings suggest that while both government and media were largely successful in framing the floods as a victim crisis, their communication efforts suffered from inconsistencies, delays, and a lack of coordination.

Government Response and SCCT

According to SCCT, during a victim crisis, organizations should focus on expressing empathy, providing accurate information, and demonstrating a commitment to recovery (Coombs, 2007). In the case of the 2022 floods, the government followed these guidelines by emphasizing victimization and relief efforts. However, the delays in information dissemination and the inconsistencies between provincial and federal authorities undermined these strategies. SCCT also highlights the importance of providing actionable information, which was often missing in the government's messaging, particularly regarding long-term recovery efforts (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). The failure to provide consistent and timely information about recovery plans and flood prevention measures may have diminished public confidence in government institutions.

Media's Role in Crisis Communication

The media's framing of the disaster was mixed. While media outlets provided critical coverage of the humanitarian impact, they also incorporated political framing that sometimes shifted the focus away from practical solutions to the crisis. According to Zaheer (2016), such sensationalism can detract from the primary goal of risk communication, which is to inform and guide the public. Moreover, the lack of consistency between government messages and media reports was a significant challenge. This lack of alignment likely contributed to confusion, especially in the early stages of the crisis.

The use of social media, however, emerged as a powerful tool for disseminating information quickly and directly to affected populations. As Javed (2020) suggests, social media platforms can bridge gaps in official communication, allowing for real-time updates and community engagement. This highlights the need for greater integration of social media into government communication strategies.

Improving Coordination and Consistency

The lack of coordination between government agencies and media outlets was one of the primary challenges identified in this study. SCCT advocates for consistent messaging across all platforms, a recommendation that was not fully realized during the 2022 floods. Improved coordination between the government and media could have ensured that all parties presented a unified front, which is crucial for maintaining public trust and guiding effective disaster response.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

This study underscores the importance of strategic crisis communication during natural disasters. Future research could explore how media and government can better integrate their communication efforts, particularly through the use of new media technologies. Additionally, understanding the public's response to these messages in different socio-economic and geographic contexts could help refine future communication strategies.

Conclusion

The 2022 Pakistan floods presented a significant challenge for both government and media institutions in terms of crisis communication. The government's messaging largely followed SCCT's guidelines for victim crises, focusing on empathy and relief efforts. However, inconsistencies in messaging, delays in disseminating crucial information, and poor

coordination between federal and provincial authorities undermined the effectiveness of their communication. Similarly, while media outlets were successful in framing the disaster from a humanitarian perspective, political framing often diverted attention from practical solutions and led to conflicting reports, exacerbating public confusion.

The study underscores the importance of timely, accurate, and consistent communication during a crisis. SCCT's principles, particularly the focus on empathy and actionable information, proved to be essential in guiding the government's response. However, gaps in coordination between governmental agencies and media outlets highlighted the need for better integration and alignment of messaging. Additionally, the use of social media emerged as a powerful tool for disseminating real-time updates and engaging directly with affected populations.

Future research should focus on improving the integration of traditional and social media in crisis communication strategies, particularly in contexts where access to information is limited. Furthermore, understanding how different socio-economic and geographical groups interpret and respond to crisis messages will be crucial for refining communication strategies in future disaster scenarios. Overall, this study highlights the need for enhanced preparedness in communication efforts, which could lead to more effective disaster response and recovery in the future.

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