

# Letter to Editor: Challenges of Risk Communication in Plasco Building Collapse



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## 1. Introduction

Crises in fact occur as a result of (sudden) natural and abnormal events which impose loss and damages to a group of people or human society. More than anything else, crisis management requires experience, preparedness, skill, prompt response, wisdom, and creativity for dealing with surprising and unexpected situations. Crisis management is a planning and implementation process. It systematically observe crises and by their analyses, searches for means to mitigate their adverse consequences. Scientists are in complete agreement that in a crisis, the highest pressure is imposed on the managers of the organization. Therefore, managers must be prepared and develop their own capabilities to appropriately deal with the crises. Crises, and especially natural disasters are among those incidents that short-term solutions cannot reduce their intensity and even sometimes can increase the severity of the crisis [1].

With regard to the unpredictable nature of natural disasters and necessity of making rapid and correct decisions and implementing them, also based on the theoretical and fundamental knowledge, crisis management has been developed. The main concern in a crisis is public safety. Planning and preparedness of the crisis team can bring more rapid response and more effective decision-making. Prompt and accurate response play important roles in public safety [2].

Mass media, with their influence and expansion in societies and all aspects of human life, have become an integral part of the crisis management. From one perspective, it could be argued that media is the most sensitive strategic point in crises, at national or international level. Therefore, the first point in this issue is the crisis management that is the responsibility of the media; because from this perspective, the media is the first institution in which data and news stories are reviewed and evaluated. And second point is that regarding the importance and sensitivity of the media in crisis situations, how the

media can be directed toward solving the crisis, not its escalation by appropriate planning and mechanisms.

The media function needs a special mechanism in times of crisis. In this case, not only management hardware requirements such as media planning, formation of crisis team and media support organizations should be anticipated, but also the influence of the media on public opinion and foreign policy in the event of crisis, the performance of the media in different crisis situations, advantages and disadvantages of media attention to the crisis (before, during, and after the crisis) as well as management software requirements should be considered. Mass media plays an important role in informing in order to respond appropriately to the current and future crisis. Planning and decision-making are among the most important management measures in each organization and the task of media organization is production and distribution of messages, including the news [3].

The researchers believe that the relationship between the audience and the media continues during the crisis that furthers the media function beyond the informational one into emotional support [4]. These functions can be used for social solidarity, national consensus, attracting donations and participation in crisis, reduction of conflict with preventive educational, cultural, and political functions, justification and acceptance of the crisis, or crisis escalation to achieve political and social purposes [5].

## 2. Risk Communication Challenges in Crisis

Investigating the status of crisis notification in recent years clearly shows the media clumsiness in covering disasters and their untrained journalists. The most recent case of crisis in our country was the collapse of the Plasco building, which resulted in the death of 20 countrymen and injuries of relief team members. This case had the weakest risk communication process and lacked planning and information unit management

Unfortunately, in this event, the information management faced the challenges from the early hours. More than 72 hours have passed since the disaster of Plasco that public opinion faced the media crisis besides the crisis itself. Besides failure of the media to provide the public opinion with a transparent in real-time account of the disaster, it did not have access to detailed information for informing. However, the presence of few media such as Fars News and IRIB News agencies was not also effective and their news stories were denied repeatedly [6].

In addition to the confusion of administrators and the public, inconsistencies in reported statistics and information, providing false and contradictory statistics about the number of imprisoned under the debris, repeated confirmations and denials, lack of media attention to the families of the victims, contradictory answers on the cause and severity of the incident, lack of coordination among authorities in the expression of financial damages and the release of some non-credible news provoked the crisis and made this doubt to certainty that officials and managers would not know much about crisis management protocols, particularly information and communication with the media. This made crisis management more difficult and showed poor management more than ever. Vacancy of coordinated, appropriate, and accurate information, was filled by rumors and inappropriate activities of citizen-journalists that made officials to spend a lot of time and energy to deny rumors such as the number of victims and imprisoned, the slow pace of relief operations, lack of safety equipment, and operational errors of firefighters to extinguish the fire. This problem leads to more public criticism of the informational situation as well as the rescue operation and its supporting mechanism [7].

According to the evaluation carried out regarding how to inform the incident, 44% of people followed the news through social networks, 46.15% through TV, 7.7% by news agency services, and the rest followed related news through newspapers [8]. However, in the meantime, IRIB broadcasting fully utilized the media chaos under the influence of the mismanagement of Plasco crisis headquarter and broadcasted live the rescue operation from the very first minute and tried to have the exclusive coverage of the event, but the notification has also had its problems. News release and their denials made the audiences to lose their momentarily trust to the media. On the other hand, in the event of a crisis, people pursued news and their analysis, but with live broadcast of removing debris by the national media, the space was prepared for cyberspace, citizen-reporters, and non-governmental agencies and this leads to the spread of rumors one after another which were brought even

to the state media and state television. Closure of the press in the first two days of the incident is considered a major weakness in notification system of the country. In reviewing the notification of the Plasco incident, the following weaknesses are evident: 1) Dissatisfaction of 60% of people with the informing [8]; 2) Lack of Crisis News Headquarter to manage public opinion; 3) Confusion among the people; 4) Failure to report accident victims statistics; 5) Contradiction between words and statistics of different authorities [9]; 6) Weakness of the field and wide national media information to satisfy public opinion; 7) Strengthening the role of social media in informing; and 8) Mistrust in the national media and trying to get the news from unofficial sources [10].

### 3. Solutions

By studying many crises in various fields, it is concluded that designing an appropriate operational model for efficient information and risk communication in crisis is very important to maintain public trust -as the most valuable and most important social capital. Today with regard to globalization and the emergence of communication network, it could definitely be said that media is at the heart and center of this pattern with regard to its diversified and social functions.

Training reporters by agencies involved in disaster management can promote their function at each stage of the crisis, including education and awareness before the crisis; reporting, training, and coordination during crisis; and analysis and calming people after the crisis. As per the law and regulations of the National Disaster Management Organization, designing Crisis News Headquarter, formation of risk communication Committee with the membership of representatives of relief organizations public relations, Setting up spokesperson for the crisis in the scene, preparations of responsive administrators from different operation units for effective and continuous communication with the media, are among solutions for improvement of the risk communication process in crisis.

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