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Redefining the Role of Media in Crisis Management: From Reactive Reporting to Trusted Information

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Letter to Editor

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Dear Editor,

Effective crisis management depends on timely communication with the public. During a disaster, people need not simply more information, but information that is timely, understandable, credible, consistent, and actionable. Communication should therefore be regarded as an integral component of preparedness, response, recovery, and risk reduction rather than a secondary activity. The World Health Organization identifies risk communication and community engagement as essential capacities before, during, and after emergencies (1).

Disaster-risk communication is not a one-way transfer of messages but a multidimensional process shaped by the sender, the recipient, the communication environment, and the process itself (2). In Iran, studies have identified recurring challenges, including delayed and uncertain warnings, limited transparency, inadequate training, and reduced public trust in official warnings and relief organizations (3,4). Evidence from health emergencies similarly highlights the importance of institutional coordination, social listening, and community engagement (5). However, these studies primarily address relief organizations and health systems; their implications for the role of media warrant explicit consideration.

Against this background, the role of media in crisis management warrants reconsideration. The central issue is not whether media should produce more crisis-related news, but whether they can help build and sustain a reliable information environment before, during, and after emergencies. In a crisis, the value of media lies not only in how quickly information is reported, but in whether it is verified, clearly explained, transparently updated, and useful for public decision-making.

This shift requires a broader understanding of the media's role. The public-service perspective offers a useful analytical framework, but public service should not be defined solely by state ownership, public funding, or formal institutional status. Rather, it refers to the capacity of media organizations to serve the public interest by providing accurate, accessible, educational, and trustworthy information. This capacity depends on legal mandates, professional standards, institutional resources, verification procedures, editorial practices, and relationships with audiences. Recent scholarship extends this role beyond news provision to include fact-checking, social media monitoring, explaining uncertainty, and promoting media literacy, all of which rely on professional credibility and societal trust (6). The question for Iran, therefore, is how different media organizations can contribute to a trustworthy crisis-information environment within their respective legal, institutional, and professional capacities, and under what enabling conditions.

Within this perspective, a stronger media contribution to crisis management in Iran can be organized around a set of complementary functions, from preparedness before a crisis to evaluation and learning afterward. The

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effectiveness of these functions depends on enabling conditions, including timely access to official information, professional editorial autonomy, and clear communication mandates. Without these conditions, even well-trained media organizations may be unable to verify, correct, or contextualize information effectively. Strengthening these conditions should therefore accompany efforts to build media capacity.

First, trusted information begins with communication preparedness before a crisis occurs. Crisis communication cannot be improvised effectively once an emergency has begun. Evidence from Iran indicates that preparedness requires communication planning, training, risk monitoring, adequate infrastructure, and inter-organizational coordination (7). For media organizations, this means predefined communication protocols, a list of credible official and scientific sources, clear professional responsibilities, training of journalists in risk and emergency communication, and channels with emergency authorities and experts established in advance rather than during an incident or disaster.

Second, the priority at the onset of a crisis should be to provide verified and credible information as early as possible, rather than simply to be the first to report. In a fast-moving and competitive communication environment, premature or insufficiently verified reporting can create confusion that is difficult to correct. Media organizations should therefore distinguish between speed and haste. Initial reports should clearly communicate what is known, what remains uncertain, and what is still being verified, while identifying reliable sources wherever possible, such as official agencies or scientific authorities. When information changes, corrections should be explicit and transparent rather than silently replacing previous claims. The objective should be rapid communication without compromising verification, accuracy, or clarity.

Third, media should help maintain a coherent and transparent information environment throughout a crisis. Fragmented communication, multiple spokespersons, inconsistent messages, and delays in releasing verified information can create an information vacuum that may be filled by speculation or unverified claims. Iranian evidence highlights the importance of inter-organizational communication, coherent risk-information management, and clear communication arrangements (3,7). Media organizations should therefore maintain established communication channels with relevant emergency authorities, scientific experts, and operational agencies. Such coordination, however, should not involve uncritical repetition of official statements. The professional role of media remains to verify, contextualize, and explain information clearly, while identifying uncertainties and correcting inaccuracies when necessary.

Fourth, credibility and public trust are essential to the effectiveness of crisis communication. Even technically accurate messages may have limited impact when audiences do not trust their sources. Research in Iran has identified distrust of public warnings and reduced confidence in relief organizations as important challenges to effective risk communication (4). Trust cannot be established simply by increasing the volume of official messaging. Rather, it develops through consistency, transparency, acknowledgment of uncertainty, correction of errors, professional competence, and communication that recognizes the concerns and experiences of affected populations. Trust should therefore be understood as the outcome of sustained communication quality rather than an immediate product of crisis messaging.

Fifth, trusted information requires meaningful interaction with communities. Communities are not merely passive recipients of warnings; they possess local knowledge, identify emerging needs, and can indicate whether information is understood, relevant, and trusted. Evidence from Iran highlights the importance of linking institutional communication systems with communities, strengthening the capacity of local focal points, coordinating stakeholders, and using social listening and social insight to improve communication planning (5). Media organizations should therefore establish mechanisms, such as audience feedback channels and local correspondents, to identify public information needs, address recurring questions, and communicate community concerns to relevant institutions. Such interaction can also reveal gaps between official messages and public understanding, thereby improving the relevance and credibility of crisis information.

Sixth, information should be actionable, not merely accurate. Technically accurate information is not necessarily effective if people do not know how to act on it. Effective early-warning systems require timely, authoritative, accurate, and

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actionable information, together with preparedness that enables individuals and communities to respond appropriately (8). Crisis reporting should therefore, whenever possible, address practical questions: What has happened? Who is at risk? What should people do now? What should they avoid? Where can they obtain verified information or assistance? This approach provides greater public value than repeatedly reporting incident statistics without clear practical guidance.

Seventh, misinformation management should be integrated into routine crisis-information practices. Social media can facilitate rapid information exchange and improve situational awareness, but it can also accelerate the spread of rumors and unverified claims, which may influence public decision-making and complicate emergency response (9). Media organizations should therefore establish systematic processes to monitor emerging narratives, identify and verify potentially harmful claims, prioritize high-risk misinformation, issue clear corrections, and assess the effectiveness of corrective communication. Fact-checking should not be treated solely as a post hoc activity but should be integrated into the crisis-information workflow (6).

Finally, the production of trusted information should continue beyond the immediate crisis through post-crisis evaluation and institutional learning. Post-crisis reviews should assess which messages reached the public, which sources were trusted, which communication channels were effective, where delays occurred, and what forms of misinformation or misunderstanding emerged. Where appropriate, this evaluation may include indicators such as the time to the first verified report, audience trust, and the rate and speed of corrections. Iranian research highlights the importance of monitoring, documentation, evaluation, coordination, and sustained improvement in disaster-risk communication (3,7). Without systematic institutional learning, communication weaknesses are likely to recur in future emergencies. Post-crisis evaluation should therefore be treated as an integral part of the crisis-information cycle rather than as a separate administrative exercise.

Taken together, these considerations suggest a practical framework for clarifying the contribution of media to crisis management in Iran. This framework comprises communication preparedness before a crisis; timely provision of verified and credible initial information; continuous, coordinated, and transparent communication as the situation evolves; meaningful community engagement and actionable guidance; systematic monitoring, verification, and correction of misinformation; and post-crisis evaluation and institutional learning. These functions are interdependent rather than isolated stages. They form a continuous information cycle in which preparedness supports credible reporting, verification and transparency strengthen public trust, coordination improves public understanding, community engagement helps identify information needs, and misinformation management protects the information environment. Post-crisis evaluation, in turn, supports institutional learning and helps strengthen preparedness for future emergencies.

Within this framework, organizations such as the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) and other news and communication institutions should be considered in light of their respective legal mandates, professional capacities, and institutional roles. The objective is not to impose a single organizational model on Iran's media system or to treat media organizations as substitutes for emergency-management institutions, scientific authorities, or official warning systems. Rather, it is to strengthen the capacity of the broader media environment to produce and circulate information that is verified, comprehensible, credible, and useful to the public. The contribution of media lies in transforming reliable information into communication that people can understand, evaluate, and use, while also identifying information gaps and conveying public concerns to relevant institutions.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of crisis communication should be judged not primarily by the number of reports produced or the speed of publication, but by whether people receive information they can trust, understand, and use. A shift from predominantly reactive reporting towards a stronger trusted-information function could strengthen preparedness, support more coherent crisis response, help limit the effects of misinformation, and contribute to public resilience. For Iran, the priority should therefore not simply be to communicate more during crises, but to communicate earlier, more credibly, more coherently, more transparently, and more usefully. The central role of media in crisis management is

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not merely to report what has happened, but to help ensure that reliable information reaches the public in a form that supports informed judgment and appropriate action.

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