



# To what extent is media an effective tool of communication and management of crises and disasters such as COVID-19?

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## **Abstract**

Media is the biggest source of information to the public at large. It educates people about the events going on all over the world through varied sources ranging from traditional print media in the form of newspapers all through modes of modern/digital media through a click of a button.

Of the many things that media is useful for, one of its purposes which has been studied closely is its ability to establish quick communication channels with the public during disasters and crises' - both natural and also corporate. In light of COVID-19, the media has further strengthened its presence in the world as it was one of the main sources of information that the public turned to for information regarding the virus. However, where some useful information was provided, there was also a fair amount of misinformation spread. It is on this basis that this paper looks at how sometimes the media can bring calm but equally also spread chaos when information is unchecked and spread.

## **Introduction**

Media - Bringer of Calm or Chaos?

Media has changed significantly in recent years, from Print Media to Radio to Television. Regardless of the form that the media has taken, it has almost always done its job of conveying messages to the people and making them more aware. In today's time, media has arguably become a huge part of everyone's life and plays a major role in society as being a platform that can either strengthen or weaken society (Lumen, 2022).

Nowadays, Media is the biggest source of information to the public at large. Media is playing a vital role in society as we can watch all the latest news through it. In fact, it is also considered the fourth pillar of state after the legislature, executive and judiciary (Lumen, 2022). There are 5 types of media - Broadcasting, Print Media, Movies, Internet and Games. The main sources of broadcasting that have been around for quite some time are television and the radio. Though both these sources serve the purpose of informing people about the latest ongoings, one relies more on visuals while the other on audio. Print Media consists of Newspapers, Magazines and Books. Newspapers are sent out daily, nationwide, and magazines have either monthly or weekly issues. The internet is one of the newer sources of media and one that is gaining immense popularity as a means to obtain information quickly.

When the media is used to communicate with the public, it is either with the aim of spreading awareness and/or minimizing various objectives. Social scientists believe that through a system of devoted international cooperation, the human suffering caused by catastrophic impacts of disasters could be reduced significantly. This cooperation revolves around public information and education, which is brought to us through the media (Mirbabaie et al., 2020). A crisis in all its forms is an inseparable part of mankind's life and their diversity is increasing over time. Mass media play a special role in providing information and making people aware of the situation during crisis situations whether they pertain to a global disaster or a company-specific one (The Hindu, 2020). Media can do one of two things in every situation, it can either calm the population and encourage them to take positive actions or terrorize the population and create chaos.

Of the many disasters which humankind have seen in recent years, the outbreak of coronavirus has been one of the biggest health crises that have had a deep impact on the way we perceive our world and our everyday lives. During this time, the media was the main source of understanding what was going on in the world and the intensity of the situation. The media has been known to either overplay or downplay the situation on various occasions, which has caused nationwide panic and, in many instances, unjust behavior towards people belonging to specific communities.

On the basis of the above, it is clear that even though media is a vital aspect of society and influences the level of awareness among individuals about varying happenings in the world, there is scope for media to represent certain situations in an incorrect light. This leads to bigger problems for society. Therefore, this paper aims to answer the question **“To what extent is media an effective tool of communication and management of crises and disasters such as COVID-19?”**

## What is media?

Media has existed for years and evolved over time to meet the necessary requirements of the consumers, though, aspects of traditional media still remain, modern media now factors the internet. Modern media comes in various forms, including print media, which includes newspapers, magazines, books, and comics or graphic novels. Historically, only wealthy publishers had access to sophisticated type-setting technologies necessary to create printed material, but this has changed in recent years with the widespread accessibility of desktop publishing software and print-on-demand publication services (MentalHelp.net, n.d.). The other forms of modern media include televisions, movies, video games, etc.

As we've already established, the political news environment has changed dramatically in the last few years, and the days when political information was confined to a few networks news channels and major national newspapers, or magazines are long gone. In today's time, newspapers and network TV have 24-hour cable channels and are the hosts of online news services, these range from online efforts by traditional publishers to user-generated content on blogs, personal web pages, social networking sites, etc. The internet is without question, the most popular source of information and the preferred choice for news ahead of television, newspapers and radio, according to a new poll in the United States (Reuters, 2009).

One of the biggest components of the Internet is social media which refers to a computer-based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information through virtual networks and communities. For most individuals, social media is used as a means to access quick electronic communication of content, such as personal information, documents, videos, and photos. Users engage with social media via a computer, tablet, or smartphone via web-based software or applications (Dollarhide, 2021). Even governments and politicians utilize social media to engage with constituents and voters. But, for businesses, social media is an indispensable tool. Companies use the platform to find and engage with customers, drive sales through advertising and promotion, gauge consumer trends, and offer customer service or support. Social media has changed the way we all interact with each other online. It gives us the ability to discover what's happening in the world in real-time, to connect with each other and stay in touch with long-distance friends, and it allows us to have access to endless amounts of information at our fingertips.

Now, another question arises, is media, or "social media" doing us more harm than good?

Here are the facts, the new internet craze has reduced people's productivity, extensively. There will always be the constant urge of checking your phone for the latest news, especially when you know that you have all the information you could need at your fingertips. According to various researchers, the average person spends about an hour a day on social media, which constitutes about nine weeks per year, thinking about what you could create, build, give, or learn with that time (Shaw, 2019). More importantly, however, the new modern forms of

media are quite stressful as, on these platforms, most of the news we receive is over-exaggerated which adds a heightened sense of panic in most of us. Although social media was started with the intention of putting out easier forms of communication, over time it turned to a platform of noise and clutter as due to the over-exaggeration, ample false news and rumors, it lost the purpose it was initially created for.

On the whole, whatever form it may be in, the media plays a significant role in each of our lives by keeping everyone updated about the various events going on around the world. In today's day and age, we can keep ourselves updated with the latest news and current affairs with a few clicks on our devices. It is also one of the handiest ways of communicating with a mass audience and the majority of the people around the world rely on the various sources of media for keeping themselves updated with the various ongoing issues around the world (Almerja, 2018). Through the media, we're able to acquire immense knowledge and transmit information - it allows us to simply scroll through tabs in order to gain knowledge. The media gives every individual a platform to voice their issues in society, it plays a constructive role in society by raising awareness about certain issues - at least most of the time...

### **Media and crisis management**

It is very evident that media is a powerhouse, and the mass media are seen today as playing a key role in enhancing globalization, facilitating cultural exchange and multiple flows of information and image between countries through international news broadcasts, television programming, new technologies, film and music (Matos, 2022). The media has a great global reach. Realizing this, many firms, governments and emergency organizations have started taking advantage of using media particularly during times of crisis and management as it's an easy way for them to spread awareness nationwide while simultaneously saving money. Therefore, there are many examples of natural disasters being communicated in the media with the purpose of reassuring and informing the public as well as companies tackling disasters in the media with the intention to be open and honest with the public and their customers.

The Siachen Glacier Avalanche took place in 2016, it was a deadly avalanche that killed ten Indian soldiers earlier this month on the disputed 20,000-foot-high Siachen glacier in Kashmir that received extensive coverage in the Indian and Pakistani media. The voices of the media were ignored by the public as an outpouring of patriotic fervor took place that cast the dead soldiers as "Bravehearts" who had died for their country. The avalanche prompted some commentators in both countries to call for an early settlement of what seemed to be a senseless dispute between India and Pakistan. The media also used this avalanche to spread the word about the upcoming environmental problems which are said to be the root cause of the incident. They also informed the people that if climate change and global warming continue to rise at this alarming rate, then we must be expecting many more avalanches to come in the near future. A scientist said both minimum and maximum winter

temperatures on the glacier were showing steadily upward trends. “That may sound like very good news to soldiers forced to live and patrol in temperatures that can go down to minus 40 (degrees Celsius). But these upward trends are not uniform; they fluctuate a lot. That cracks the ice and makes an avalanche more likely.”

Using media as a tool to communicate a crisis is not only common for emergency services or governments when it comes to natural disasters. Instead, even companies rely on this mode to communicate with the public during times of crisis. For example, Uber, which is a ride-hailing company that started in 2017, got involved in a scandal when it was revealed that its CEO, Travis Kalanick was serving on an advisory council to President Trump. Soon after this news broke, the hashtag DeleteUber was born, and Kalanick announced that he would be stepping down from the council shortly after. Then, the entire scandal, along with the hashtag, made a comeback, first when Uber continued operating at JFK International Airport during a taxi strike in protest of President Trump’s immigration ban, sparking a company crisis, and then, again, when ex-employee Susan Fowler Rigetti levelled claims of sexual harassment and gross HR misconduct at the company. Kalanick announced an immediate investigation into the issue, but early investors voiced concerns over the impartiality of the internal investigation and the company’s private arbitration clause (Prater, n.d.).

How did Uber handle the negative attention? While the company continued to release statements concerning each incident, it’s hard to ignore the fact that missteps kept piling up. A lack of transparency had been Uber’s biggest failing in handling much of the public interest. A heartfelt letter from the CEO promising to be a better leader won’t get the company far unless the public sees steps and actions taken to get there. Uber is a classic example of crisis management gone wrong (Prater, n.d.).

As long as the communication is effective and transparent towards the people, then the media proves to be a very important tool during disasters as they help in spreading awareness, calming the people down, guiding them on what to do next, etc. However, there is also the tendency of the information to get misleading or over-exaggerated if the communication is not effective and controlled. Information being misleading has many side effects and causes chaos, so I hope that in any situation in the future, the media is transparent with the information that they share.

### **Media and COVID-19**

In the initial days of COVID 19, the uncertainty of the entire situation and the vague news had various mental health consequences. Inadequate crisis communication brought dire personal and economic consequences. Mounting research shows that seemingly endless newsfeeds related to COVID-19 infection and death rates could considerably increase the risk of mental health problems. Unfortunately, media reports that included infographics

regarding the influence of COVID-19 on mental health may be a source of adverse psychological effects on individuals.

Although COVID-19 is not the first health crisis that has been spoken about by the media, the Ebola Virus was also covered by the media, and social media, quite extensively. In the United States, news media and social media have been blamed for sensationalizing the Ebola virus and causing unnecessary alarm. After going through many news articles, it was found that there were many risk-elevated messages which contributed to increased public concern. There was also a situation in 2014 when there was a miscommunication regarding the Ebola Virus which caused a lot of fear amongst western news media. Of non-joke tweets, 10% of Ebola-related tweets contained false or partially false information. Twenty-five percent were related to politics, 28% contained content that provoked reader response or promoted discord, 42% contained risk elevating messages and 72% were related to health (Bakebillah et al., 2021). The media also continuously associated the Ebola virus with Africa, as they're doing now with the Omicron strain, which causes people to believe that Africa is unsafe and brings in a lot of false comments about the continent.

With COVID 19, the media has been known to jump to conclusions without any confirmation, for example with the Omicron Strain, they were quick to say that it was more severe than the Delta Strain, but recently, a WHO study confirmed that that was not the case. This once again is an example of how the media spreads misinformation and generates fear amongst the people. Acting and relying on false information can kill, COVID 19 proved that. Experts and researchers say that in the first 3 months of 2020, nearly 6 000 people around the globe were hospitalized because of coronavirus misinformation (WHO, 2022). During this period, researchers say at least 800 people may have died due to misinformation related to COVID-19. Researchers have termed this spread of false media as “infodemics”, and even though infodemics have been around for a long time, they spread extraordinarily fast in today’s time due to social media. Infodemics are known to generate fear, anxiety, finger-pointing, stigma, violent aggression and dismissal of proven public health measures amongst the people — which can lead to loss of life (WHO, 2022). This information that was being spread was not just about the spread of the virus but also about the severity of it, the treatment and prevention, conspiracy theories and unverifiable claims. In order to attempt to control the spread of false information ‘Stop the Spread’ rolled out on BBC world television, website and apps during May - June 2020. Its aim was to help raise the awareness of the public about the misinformation around COVID 19. They also encouraged people to double-check the information to limit the damage and spread of false information (WHO, 2022).

This spread of misinformation is so harmful on the lines of it creating a lot of unjustified fear but more importantly, generating prejudice towards the Asian community thanks to the constant ‘framing’ of COVID-19 as the ‘Chinese virus’ in the media. This led to a huge increase in hate crimes against Asians and a lot of trolling on various social media platforms. Late last year, the United Nations issued a report that detailed "an alarming

level" of racially motivated violence and other hate incidents against Asian Americans. It is a known fact that COVID 19 has fueled Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia. Xenophobia is the fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners or of anything that is strange or foreign (Merriam-Webster, 2022) the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the blaming of individuals on the basis of race/ethnicity and national origin. The most notable anti-Asian COVID-19-related discrimination has stemmed from the former president of the U.S., referring to the virus as the "China virus" or "Kung Flu". President Trump made remarks about the origins of the virus, including saying "It's China's fault" as early as March 2020, and continued to politicize and weaponize this language for the remainder of his presidency even after news of pandemic-related anti-Asian attacks surfaced (Hahm et al., 2021).

Overall, the misrepresentation of COVID-19 in the media is harmful because it is known to generate fear, anxiety, finger-pointing, stigma, violent aggression and dismissal of proven public health measures amongst the people, which can, eventually, lead to loss of life.

### **How young adults are engaging with technology during COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic has proven time and time again that the spread of misinformation on social media is a threat to global public health, at times, as much as the virus as well. Technology does help in keeping people informed, but if the information in itself is incorrect, it leads to a pandemic of its own kind, an infodemic, which has been known to undermine the global response and jeopardizes measures to control the pandemic. As the rise of the pandemic led to multiple lockdowns worldwide, young adults grasped social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and Twitter as an escape.

In order to understand how young adults are engaging with technology during this global communication crisis, an international study was conducted, covering approximately 23,500 respondents, aged 18-40 years, in 24 countries across five continents (Thompson, 2022). This project was a collaboration between the World Health Organization (WHO), Wunderman Thompson, the University of Melbourne and Pollfish. The respondents were asked whether they would share science-related content in regards to COVID 19 on social media and 43.9% of the respondents said that they would share science-related content, this finding disregards the general trend on social media where funny, entertaining and emotional content spread fastest. 59.1% of the respondents said that they are aware of what information on social media is false and what is true. Gen Z and Millennials are considered to be too relaxed when it comes to the pandemic though this is not what was shown in the data as over 90% of the respondents were concerned about contracting COVID-19 or of their close family and friends contracting the disease. They were also concerned about the economy crashing even further.

The excessive hours spent on social media by young adults, especially during the pandemic, has led to various mental health issues as well, as they are known to have developed social anxiety and depression. The false and unrealistic standards set by the beauty and healthcare community across these platforms has also led to many young adults developing body image issues and eating disorders or triggered pre-existing body image issues. Schools, which were a way of communicating had also shut down and switched to an online platform which just added to their social anxiety.

People all across the world witnessed the entire world shut down, in a way that no one could have ever imagined and WHO is putting a foot forward to help young adults understand the severity of the situation and trying to help them in these tough and battling times

## **Conclusion**

In today's time, media has inarguably become a huge part of everyone's life and plays a major role in society as being a platform that can either strengthen or weaken society. Media is also considered the fourth pillar of state after the legislative, executive and judiciary, even governments and politicians have begun to utilize social media to engage with constituents and voters. Gradually, the question arises, "To what extent is the media an effective tool of communication and management of crisis and disasters such as COVID-19?".

Media has existed for years and evolved over time to meet the necessary requirements of the consumers, though, aspects of traditional media still remain, modern media now factors the internet. When media is used to communicate with the public, it is either with the aim of spreading awareness and/or minimizing various objectives. Media is known to do one of two things in every situation, it can either calm the population and encourage them to take positive actions or terrorise the population and create chaos.

Now, does social media do us more harm than good? It is recognised that social media is one of the handiest ways of communicating with a mass audience and the majority of people around the world rely on several sources of media for keeping themselves updated with the various ongoing issues around the world, but if the communication is not effective and transparent towards the people, it can lead to chaos amongst the people. For example, looking at the most recent and relevant happenings during COVID-19, it was reported that the spread of misinformation resulted in the deaths of around 800 people. There are plenty more situations where the media has caused chaos rather than calming the population, such as The Siachen Glacier Avalanche which took place in 2016 and the downfall of Uber in 2017.

On the whole, though the media has definite power to communicate and manage disasters when communication channels are not established and maintained, things can take a turn for the worse.

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