



THE ROLE OF MEDIA DURING DISASTERS

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New York Times





AVN/NHK



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The Modern Disaster Landscape

A World of Increasing Risk: Disasters caused losses to the tune of \$3.8 trillion in 2024 alone.

Two Core Categories:

Natural Disasters: Caused by hazards like hurricanes or quakes and floods.

Man-Made Disasters: Result from human negligence, error, or actions, such as industrial accidents, infrastructure collapses, or conflict.



The Three-Phase Disaster Cycle

The media's responsibility is a continuous cycle, a role underscored by global policies like the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

1. Pre-Disaster: Raise public awareness, educate on risks, scrutinise infrastructure, and build public trust.

2. Response (During Disaster): Disseminate early warnings, provide actionable life-saving information, and combat rumors.

3. Recovery (Post-Disaster): Support the public with resources, evaluate the effectiveness of the response, hold power accountable, and rebuild.



Social Responsibility Theory

- **Our Core Mission:** Media freedom is a privilege that comes with an obligation to serve the public good.
- **In a Disaster, this means:**
 - Prioritising accurate, life-saving information over sensationalism and profit.
 - Providing comprehensive, contextualised reporting.
 - Giving a voice to all segments of society, especially the most vulnerable and marginalised.
- This theory is the '**Why**' behind our work in a crisis.

Agenda-Setting & Framing

We don't just report reality; we construct it.

- **Agenda-Setting:** By choosing *what* to cover and with what prominence, the media tells the public what issues are important, influencing both public and policy agendas.
 - *Example:* Intense focus on government failures.
- **Framing:** How a story is told defines the problem, its causes, and its solutions.
 - *Example:* Is a flood a "human interest" story of victim or a "responsibility" story of failed governance? The choice of frame shapes public perception and demands for action.



▶ - 6 days ago

Air India plane crash: On Father's Day, he flew to Ahmedabad to say hello to one son, goodbye to another

TNN / Updated: Jun 16, 2025, 05:11 IST



Ramesh Bhaliya arrived in Ahmedabad to claim his younger son Ajaykumar's remains after the AI 171 plane crash, while his elder son Viswash, the sole survivor, recovers in the hospital. The brothers, British citizens originally from Diu, were in India for business. Viswash, seated near the emergency exit, survived w ... R



AHMEDABAD: It was [Father's Day](#) on Sunday. Ramesh Bhaliya arrived in Ahmedabad not to receive warm hugs but to collect the mortal remains of his youngest son. The London businessman flew down to Civil Hospital

The Ethical Bedrock: Verification & The "Infodemic"

- The first casualty of disaster is often the truth. Our prime directive is **accuracy over speed**.
- **The 'Infodemic'**: A dangerous mix of rumour, misinformation, and disinformation that fills the information vacuum and can increase risk.
- **Proactive Counter-Strategies:**
 - **Monitor:** Actively monitor social media for harmful falsehoods and prioritise debunking the most dangerous ones.
 - **Fill the Void:** Communicate what you know, and what you *don't* know, transparently and frequently.
 - **Verify Everything:** Use journalistic tools to verify all information, especially from unofficial sources.

Trauma-Informed Reporting 1: The Interview

- Interviewing survivors is a **privilege, not a right**. The goal is to gather an accurate story without causing further harm.
- **Key Techniques:**
 - **Consent:** Give the survivor control. Ask for consent and offer choices (Can I talk?).
 - **Listen with Empathy:** Avoid saying "I understand." Say, "I can only imagine what that was like for you".
 - **Use Person-First Language:** Define people by their humanity, not their trauma (e.g., "a person who experienced..." not "a victim").
 - **Ask Purpose-Driven Questions:** Frame the interview as a way to honour their experience or loved one, and don't leave them in a dark place.

Trauma-Informed Reporting 2: Graphic Imagery

- A profound ethical dilemma: The power to inform versus the potential to harm.
- **A Decision Framework:**
 - **Journalistic Purpose:** Is this image essential to the story?
 - **Dignity:** Does it respect the dignity of the subject?
 - **Bias Check:** Are we avoiding the "Western Gaze" by applying the same standards to all victims, regardless of race or nationality?
 - **Audience Warning:** Have we provided clear content/trigger warnings?
- Repeated exposure to graphic images is proven to cause psychological distress in audiences.

Operational Readiness: Journalist Safety is Paramount

- You cannot tell the story if you become part of it. Safety is the first priority.
- **Physical Safety:**
 - Employers must provide Risk Assessments, Training (e.g., HEFA) and proper Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).
 - Journalists must be self-sufficient (go-bag, maps, food, water) and use a buddy system.
- **Psychological Safety (Duty of Care):**
 - Media organisations must address vicarious trauma as a recognised occupational hazard.
 - Provide staff rotation, debriefs, and confidential access to professional mental health support.

The Power of Data Journalism

- **Making the Complex Clear:** Data journalism translates complex disaster data into actionable public information.
- **Applications Across the Cycle:**
 - **Preparedness:** Visualising long-term risks like climate change with localized maps.
 - **Response:** Real-time tracking of storms, fires, and other hazards.
 - **Accountability:** Analysing aid distribution to uncover patterns of failure or discrimination.

Building the Bridge: Collaborating with Emergency Services

- **The Goal:** Move from an adversarial to a collaborative relationship recognizing the shared goal of protecting the public.
- **The Strategy:** Build an "economy of trust" **before** the crisis hits.
- **Journalists:** Get to know local Public Information Officers (PIOs). Understand their procedures. Earn trust by being professional and respecting operational boundaries.
- **Emergency Managers:** View media as a vital partner for public information. Provide regular, consistent, and fair access to all out-


Differentiated Approaches: Natural vs. Man-Made

- **Natural Disasters:**

- *Sudden-Onset (e.g., Hurricane)*: Initial focus is on impact and survival. The narrative shifts to causality and blame later.
- *Slow-Onset (e.g., Drought)*: The challenge is to make an invisible crisis visible. Focus on data and long-form narrative to maintain attention.

- **Man-Made Disasters:**

- *Technological (e.g., Plant Explosion)*: Accountability is the primary frame from the start. This is fundamental to investigative work.
- *Conflict (e.g., War)*: The most dangerous and ethically complex. Focus on safety, meticulous verification, and bearing witness without becoming a tool for propaganda.

- Journalistic presence is a powerful tool for accountability, but it must be wielded with ethical precision.
 - Don't hesitate to attribute
 - Give due credit to the sources
 - Don't try to cash in on panic
 - Respect privacy
 - Bring clarity to chaos
 - Give voice to the voiceless
 - Demand accountability
 - Be prepared, be courageous
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The Watchdog's Failure: Case Study of Fukushima (2011)

- **A Cautionary Tale of "Media Capture":**
 - We should be careful about our sources.
 - Don't downplay or sensationalise
 - Pass on information quickly
 - Don't buy rumours or heresy

Conclusion & Key Takeaways

- **Institutionalise Best Practices:** Don't rely on individuals; create formal newsroom Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for disaster coverage.
- **Build Trust Before the Crisis:** Your credibility during a disaster is determined by your reporting in the calm times.
- **Report with Humanity and Purpose:** Adopt trauma-informed practices as a core journalistic skill.
- **Never Forget the Long-Term Mandate:** The story isn't over when the storm passes. The watchdog's work of accountability has just begun.

PAKISTANI REPORTER
'IN-DEPTH' COVERAGE



THANK YOU!

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