

УЛОГАТА НА МЕДИУМИТЕ ВО СПРАВУВАЊЕТО СО  
КРИЗНАТА СИТУАЦИЈА

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN DEALING WITH CRISIS  
SITUATION

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**Апстракт:** Улогата на медиумите во справувањето со кризните ситуации континуирано добива на значење и има силно влијание врз креирањето на јавното мислење и задоволување на апетитите на јавноста во однос на предметната ситуација. Научените лекции ни кажуваат дека медиумите имаат големи апетити за информации и за известување за несреќите односно кризната ситуација посебно од самото место на случувањата. Во трката за зголемување на својата гледаност и популарност тие во одредени ситуации ја преземаат улогата на истражувачи и конструираат сопствена „вистина“, наспроти реалноста. Тоа во одредени ситуации може да доведе до создавање на погрешна слика за предметната несреќа односно кризна ситуација и да ги доведе до заблуда инволвираните субјекти во разрешувањето на кризната ситуација. Ситуацијата дополнително се усложнува во случај ако се работи за кризна ситуација настаната како резултат на некоја поголема несреќа или катастрофа со голем број на жртви. Тоа е ситуација која наметнува бројни прашања на кои е потребно да се дадат релевантни информации. Самиот процес на справување со

несреќата побарува и обучени лица кои ќе комуницираат со медиумите и ќе ги застапуваат официјалните ставови односно на јавноста ќе и ги објаснат чекорите кои ги превзема Владата во справувањето со несреќата односно кризата и кои субјекти се вклучени. На тој начин ќе се задоволат апетитите на медиумите за објективно известување, а јавноста нема да биде доведена во заблуда и конфузија од противречните и непроверени информации. За да одговори на потребите од соодветно и професионално известување на медиумите, Република Македонија воспостави Регионален центар за односи со јавност во кој се обучува персонал како да комуницира со медиумите во кризни ситуации.

**Клучни зборови:** медиуми, комуникација, кризна ситуација, несреќа, јавност.

**Abstract:** The role of the media in dealing with crisis constantly gets on importance and has a strong influence on the creation of public opinion as well as satisfaction of the public appetite with respect to the situation. The lessons learned tell us that the media have a big interest for information and reporting for dealing with disaster or crisis situation especially from the spot of action. In the race to increase its audience, ratings and popularity in certain situations they take over the role of investigators and construct own "truth" versus reality. In certain situation, it can lead to creation of wrong picture for the disaster or crisis situation, and to mislead involved subjects in resolving crisis situation. The situation could be additionally complicated in the case if crisis has occurred because of great disaster or catastrophe with many victims. The process of dealing with disaster is very complex and it requires well-trained and educated personnel who will communicate with media and will promote official policy of the Government, which subjects are involved as well as explain the steps in dealing with disasters or crisis. This will satisfy the appetites of the media for information and objective reporting and public will not be confused from unconfirmed information. To meet the need of appropriate and professional media reporting, the Republic of Macedonia has established a Public Affairs Regional Center since 2005, to train personnel for communication with media in crisis.

**Key words:** media, communication, crisis, disaster, public.

## INTRODUCTION

In the last decades has significantly increased the number of disaster (natural or fabricated, technological and technical). Most of disasters are followed by huge material damage and human casualties, and usually have strong, not only economic but also political, social and other consequences for the affected country. Every accident (disaster) require an appropriate response from government institutions, local communities, non-governmental organizations, emergency and rescue services, the citizens and the media. At the beginning and during research and rescue action related to disaster, the citizens are willing for information about the disaster, especially the reasons that led to it, and the situation of their relatives who live in the affected area.

In this situation the most affected are the victim's relatives who await official data from the governmental institutions for reasons that caused crisis situation or disasters as well as the identity of the victims. On the one hand this media "interference" could be assessed as a positive because a lot of evidence from the accident remain marked by camera and they can be analyzed many times and determine in detail what really happen. However, from the other hand their as soon as possible public disclosure may cause panic among public. To avoid such unwanted situations, from which all could be harm and especially the most affected by the crisis situation, the Government should establishes procedures for crisis communication, between institutions, and other involved subject in dealing with disaster, as well as with media. Very specific phase in dealing with disaster or crisis is decision by the Government to use the Army in support of other state institutions, as well as use to support police. It is situation which open the door for numerous questions to which is needed to give relevant answers. The Republic of Macedonia have been use the Army to support other state institution in dealing with disasters very often as in situation with forest fires in 2007, floods in Strumica Region, Pelagonia, Tetovo Region in 2015 as in other situations. However, the most significant step by the Government is use of the Army to support police in dealing with migrant crisis on Southerner border. This Government decision required appropriate explanation to the media as well as to all citizens of the Republic of Macedonia. The message about use of the Army in dealing with migrant crisis sent by the Government to media and citizens was the right step, because media research activities during natural disasters shows how the media and the Government often closely cooperates in accomplishing their respective goals. Usually, this process affects the public's understanding of the disaster

event or crisis. News reports of disasters have inherent public appeal. "They are often treated as the "biggest stories," attract the largest audiences, and are remembered the longest. Like a drama, the report of a disaster "grips people's imagination, heightens the sense of importance of human action, and facilitates emotional identification" (Sood, Stockdale, and Rogers, 1987: 27-41).

The primary goal of this article is to demonstrate the role of the mass media, and social media in dealing with disasters as well as the role of the Government. The most catastrophes consider important physical and cultural contextual factors that shape and define the media's role in disasters especially in natural disasters (Perez-Lugo, 2003). Today, the role of the media is more important and more influenced than in the past. The journalists have variety of tools to detailed research every disaster. However we can not forget the role of the internet, social media, mobile phones and people who share information through this media.

### **Different Kind of Disasters**

There has been a long series of emergency situations, natural disasters, earthquakes, floods, storms, forest fires, air pollutions, man-made disasters, as well as other disasters in the world. Disasters influence whole communities and wide geographic locations. They do not recognize state borders, religions or race differences between the countries and people. They act geographically and unpredictable. "Disasters are unusual, dramatic, and often have great impact upon people's lives. Natural disasters also occur throughout the world, are unplanned, and in most cases take place independent of political control" (Van Belle, 2000:50-70).

Most important, disasters (accidents) are different kinds of events. Disaster can be characterized by natural hazards, air crashes, car, boat, or train catastrophes, collapsed buildings and so on. If disaster is huge and occur at one location, it can disrupt communities and the systems that make them work. It may be hours, days, weeks or months before those systems are back in place (Scanlon, 1998). From one hand, the answer to the disaster requires strong coordination and synchronized action between central Government, local communities, and rescued services as well as with media.

In other hand, the role of the media is very important to deal with disaster. "The media played a critical role in the recording, responding, understanding and mitigation of

disasters. The mass media had an important part of disaster prevention and management. Newspapers, television, radio and the Internet provided easy access to large public and often constituted a robust communication system which remained working even in cases of a partial breakdown of the infrastructure" (Knight, 2006:47-57).

### **The Role of Media**

After the disaster occurs, the situation is chaotically. After some unwritten rule, first on the disaster areas arrive media looking for exclusive information, and to increase its popularity. If the disaster was followed by victims appetites of media for information grow up at breakneck speed - who will be the first to disclose the number and names of victims. Moreover, in certain situations they do not take into account the feelings of the affected population and the relatives of the victims.

Depends of the nature of disaster, the citizens make decision based on real facts on the affected area and the probability of damage. They are "hungry" for variety of information for the disaster. They analyze information from different sources and make own picture about disaster. "Warnings come from a variety of sources, such as the media outlets, government officials, friends, and relatives. Not every source has equal credibility, though" (West and Orr, 2007). In some situations, citizens do not trust to the government official's information about some disaster. They believe more to their relatives and friends. "They do not trust media outlets to give the real picture on what is happening" (West, 2001) especially if media are controlled by government.

In those situations managing with information is very important and government officials try to avoid panic between the citizens. We should be careful do not place hasty information. Before, to publish the same information, it must be confirmed by government officials respond for communication with the public. It implies the existence of specific bodies or authorities which should be well educated, trained and professional in the communication with the media in crisis situations or in the major disasters or catastrophes. The Government institutions "should seek to provide reliable information to the media, as early as possible, in a concise and readily understandable form, and linked, where possible, to newsworthy events" (Hernandez, 1994).

In this information contest "newspapers remain the dominant creators of news, providing source material for news agencies while framing issues and setting agendas frequently for

television and radio (Knight, 2006:47-57). However, today own strengthened influence has the social networks through citizens currently transmit information from the place when disaster occur. "Twitter, Facebook and smartphone apps have become the latest tools in the disaster preparedness fields in part because they allow officials to reach a large number of people with important information" (Tucker, 2011, 18).

Information about each disaster traveled fast on social media than through classical printed or online news papers, and TV. People message to their family and friends that they out of danger. Today we are witnesses of the importance of the immediate transfer of information through social networks. "They provide becomes even more important during a natural disaster" (Smith, 2011). Almost each people have smart phone with camera. It opens ability to take photos and opportunity to communicate and send messages through social media at some moment when disaster occurs. "Once the event hits, we go fully into communicating our status, what we are into and the progress that we are making... The whole world can have an idea what is happening, whatever the vent is, just based on social media"(Shust, 2015).

"This shows that the use of social media in responding to natural disasters is becoming crucial to emergency response agencies...Social media enables response organizations to quickly push information to the public - something that has not been possible on such a wide scale until recently" (Sicard and Thomas, 2013,17-18).

The government officials and other emergency and relief services are not able directly to control the content of transmitted information through social networks or through other media. It sometimes could lead to the multitude and confusion of information that are placed from different sources. Many of them are speculations or false in order to obtain the popularity. Those is important because when disaster occur, (natural or man-made), faster communication and sharing information is key to save lives and reduce damage. Sometimes, people do not trust of official information, but real "perceptions about government and non-government information sources are key to personal survival" (West and Orr, 2007).

Today, all media are very important part of effective rescue operations as well as of effective preventive education to people about possible measure to prevent disaster or how to act if disaster occurs. "The media "play a vital role" in bringing this information to the people...for that government "need to establish and strengthen working relationships

with the media...as well as "to develop working relationships with the media based on mutual trust and the recognition of differing characteristics, goals, and needs" (Hernandez, 1994).

### **Disasters in Balkans – possibilities for regional approaches in dealing with disasters**

Each year natural disasters affect particular region of one country or more countries and they cause major economic and human losses, property damages, not only in the Republic of Macedonia, but around the world. All countries, nations that share the good and bad in the most direct sense of the word. Starting from the geographic proximity, as a comparative advantage in view of the transport of resources and goods, the identical nature of the security problems and challenges that countries face, open the door for stronger cooperation between countries in dealing with disasters. This cooperation have to include and cooperation with media. "The economic losses and human casualties associated with disasters have actually increased in most countries. Therefore, most countries have devoted resources, technology, and efforts aimed at the mitigation of natural hazards. One of the most popular mitigation efforts has been the creation of a strong mass communication system" (Perez-Lugo, 2003).

The Balkans is subjected to the most different threats and risks from natural disasters, which from time to time cause major losses and damage both in casualties and material and cultural-historical goods. The Republic of Macedonia geographically is located on the Balkans, and as part of the Balkans is subject to a wide spectrum of such threats and risks especially from: earthquakes, forest fires, floods, mudslides, unexploded ordnance etc. it is common characteristic for all of the countries of the Balkans which are small countries with limited resources. They share common disasters but they are not able to deal with huge disaster independently. Reasons are simply – every huge disaster affects huge geographically region shared by few states. For that is needed common and joint action between countries to deal with disasters. In the history, we had a lot of examples when one disaster affected more neighboring countries.

For example: as the most destroyable disaster which affected the Republic of Macedonia in the past, we can mention Skopje' earthquakes in 1963. It killed more than 1000 citizens, destroyed more than 15 000 apartments, buildings, and houses and caused over US \$ 3 billion in property damage (Milevski, 2013). Early this year (March 2015) some parts of the Republic of Macedonia (region of Strumica, and region of Pelagonia) were

massive flooding and destroyed roads and bridges, killed people and caused property damages. We had the some situation in region of Tetovo early this August 2015. Floods and landslides that killed several people hit this region. Damages will be further evaluated. The last year several countries of the Western Balkan were hit by floods (Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina) which led to the evacuation of more then 100 000 people, and caused US \$ billion of property damages, also affecting agricultural crops. Almost each year, forest fires, floods, earthquakes and other disasters have affected Greece. The last floods which affected Athena caused very huge properly damage with few victims. We were witnesses to all this disasters thanks to the media.

The changes in the environment, the presence of man and his interventions on the surface of the ground, its destruction by man, as well as the risks from natural disasters, demonstrate the need for all countries to enable the required structures for dealing with emergency situations and crises management, efficient on their territory and capable of cooperating and sharing experiences with neighboring countries and beyond.

Following history examples and lessons learned from natural and other disasters which affected Balkans countries in the past, we should think for regional approach in development of common and joint regional capacities and capabilities in dealing with disasters. Also, is very important how affected countries share information about same disaster. It is desirable information to be shared among the stakeholders involved in the disaster before they are placed in public. For that, purpose is very important every country, state institution, local authorities, and during non-governmental organization to have educated personal who will authorized to communicate with the media and share information.

### **Republic of Macedonia and crisis communication in dealing with disaster**

Today, the subjects that participate in crises management, protection and rescue of the population and material assets and dealing with every disaster in the Republic of Macedonia are the: Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia, Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Crises Management Centre, Protection and Rescue Directorate, as well as the public enterprises, services and agencies to whom protection and rescue is a basic professional activity. In situation when emergency exceeds the institutional capacity of these institutions then the Government use the capacities of the Army of Republic of

Macedonia in dealing with the emergency situation or removal of consequences of natural disaster, catastrophes and crises.

The legal basics for engaging the Army of the Republic of Macedonia are implemented in the final amendments and supplements of the 2011 Defense Law according to which “the MoD organizes the preparation of the system of the Ministry of Defense for crises management, as support to the crises management system of the Republic”. In addition, the Crises Management Law foresees the participation of part of the Army in support of the police in conditions when the crisis threatens the security of the Republic, and the bodies of state power do not have the appropriate resources and assets for their prevention and countering. It is good example the situation in dealing with migrant’s crises which affected whole Europe including the Republic of Macedonia. In dealing with the wave of migrants from Greece, in line to enhanced control of the southern border the Government decides to engage the Army in support of the police in dealing with this crisis. The mission of the Army in support of the police has been successful and managed to prevent the uncontrolled entry of migrants in the country.

However, in all situation when action is needed by Government and other subjects of the crisis management system as well as from local authorities and other organizations in dealing with disasters or crises is very important to have good relations with the media and well educated personnel who is going to communicated and share information with media related to the disaster or crises. Having this in mind, the Government of the Republic of Macedonia has established Public Affaires Regional Center (PARC) as a part of the Ministry of Defense, since 2005.

Through the years, the Public Affaires Regional Center (PARC) becomes the first NATO/PfP Partnership and Education Training Center for education of people for communication with media in crisis. The Mission of the PARC is to train “Public Affairs Officers (from the Armed forces and the Ministries of Defense and other State administration structures) to develop their Communication skills and to provide the necessary practical experience in Media relations that will enable them to successfully deal with the Media under a multitude of circumstances” (PARC, 2015)

The capacities of the Ministry of Interior (police) commonly used for securing the place where the disaster occurred. Those come to fore in situation when disaster occur as a result of human factor (man-made disasters). The goal is to protect and analyzed

evidences, which led to disaster, occur. In this situation, the presence of the mass media (through picture and video) is very useful primarily because much of the evidence will remain permanently recorded and they will be further analyzed if there is some doubt.

### **Conclusion**

Media played a significant role during dealing with disaster, and in recovery period. They can support or obstruct work of the government institution and other emergency services and agencies who deal with disaster. Their role is highlighted in all kinds of disaster especially in natural disaster. They share information during preparedness, mitigation and response phase, and mobilized government institutions, local communities and emergency services and agencies to deal with disaster, as well as business community in the country to help people in the recovery phase. "The media frames a disaster and can either promulgate erroneous beliefs about disaster behavior or provide a framework for understanding the process of recovery" (Nicholls, Sykes, and Camilleri, 2010:33-50). However, the media are not only who research the disaster or crisis and sent messages to public not only in affected country but all around the world. Development of IT technology, mobile phones with camera and internet, are other side of the coin because people use them to sent messages to their relatives by social media and internet. Now, the people who live in affected area by disaster or crisis even the people who caused some crisis (migrant crisis) become researchers to disaster or crisis and gradually they take the role for relevant and appropriate public reporting. TV stations, newspapers, internet media and other media very often use information from this kind of reporting as relevant information to report public. In general, dealing with disasters or crises and the challenges of non-military nature is challenging for every country. It requires the use of many resources and timely response to this to prevent and suppress at the beginning. In situations when the crisis, crisis situation or natural disasters of greater scale and exceed the capacities and capabilities of the state, in most cases the Government use the Army to deal with them. The last events in the Republic of Macedonia related to floods and landslides, as well as migrants crises show us that the Government and the local communities, and local citizens as well as other nongovernmental organizations are unprepared to deal with these kinds of disasters or crisis as well as for other major natural disasters. In general, the Republic of Macedonia has good institutional approach to deal with disaster and communicate with the media. In most situations, the media

share real information with citizens about disaster, and the citizens use social networks to share information with others about disaster.

The Government, usually use media to influences people perceptions of disaster and in some situation to decry negative impact of the catastrophes. However, little bit positive side from the last natural disaster in the Republic of Macedonia was the role of the all media. They share real information to the citizens and mobilized the all-state institution in the country to deal with disaster. During and after disasters most of government officials were on the affected areas. They directly communicate and share information with the media from the first hand. In some way, those help people and local communities to deal with disaster in the recovery phase.

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