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Crisis Communication In Public Institutions: Unveiling Media Framing And Adaptive Organizational Responses

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Abstract

This study investigates how public institutions manage crisis communication, focusing on the interaction between media framing and institutional responses. Utilizing a mixed-method design, the research integrates quantitative content analysis of 142 official crisis messages and 612 media reports with qualitative insights from interviews with communication officers. The study examines the types of media frames—responsibility, human interest, conflict, and economic consequence—and evaluates how official messages align with these frames. Results indicate that responsibility frames dominated media coverage, influencing institutions to issue corrective and empathetic messages, while alignment between institutional responses and media frames was only partial (30.3% fully aligned). Analysis reveals that gaps in alignment can affect public trust and perception of institutional competence, emphasizing the need for adaptive, responsive messaging strategies. The study also highlights the role of feedback loops, where media coverage informs institutional adjustments over the course of the crisis, demonstrating continuous learning and dynamic adaptation. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data allows for a comprehensive understanding of crisis communication effectiveness, identifying actionable insights for improving message clarity, alignment, and public engagement. This research contributes to theory by extending crisis communication frameworks to incorporate media-influenced adaptation mechanisms and provides practical guidance for public institutions seeking to enhance transparency, credibility, and trust during high-stakes events.

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INTRODUCTION

Effective crisis communication is a central responsibility for public institutions, as the manner in which information is disseminated during emergencies directly influences public perception, trust, and institutional credibility (Coombs, 2007; Fearn-Banks, 2016; Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011; Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012; Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2014; Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). In the digital age, where news spreads rapidly via traditional and social media, the framing of messages has become critical in shaping public understanding and expectations during crises (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010; Brüggemann, Lauer, & Engesser, 2014; Han, Hwang, & Jeong, 2018; Yang, Kang, & Johnson, 2010). Poorly coordinated responses or delayed messaging can exacerbate the impact of crises, leading to reputational damage and decreased public confidence (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003; Coombs, 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Liu, Horsley, & Levenshus, 2018; Ki & Nekmat, 2014). Furthermore, media coverage often emphasizes specific aspects of a crisis, such as responsibility attribution, conflict, or moral judgment, which can influence public expectations regarding institutional accountability (Cho, 2006; Reber, Kim, & Kim, 2012; Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2015; Wenzel, Stanske, & Lieberman, 2020; Liu & Kim, 2011). Social media also amplifies the dissemination of crisis narratives and allows institutions to communicate directly with the public, highlighting the complexity and immediacy of managing public perception (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009; Austin et al., 2012).

Despite extensive research on crisis communication theory, a significant gap remains regarding how media framing interacts with institutional responses in public sector contexts (Coombs, 2015; Liu, Horsley, & Levenshus, 2018; Ki & Nekmat, 2014; Jin et al., 2015; Reber et al., 2012). Prior studies typically focus either on organizational strategies for message dissemination or on media effects on public perception, without integrating both perspectives (Austin et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2011; Cho, 2006; Wenzel et al., 2020; Veil et al., 2011). In particular, few empirical studies analyze the alignment between media frames and the effectiveness of organizational messaging in mitigating reputational risk or guiding public behavior during crises (Coombs, 2015; Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2014; Avery et al., 2010; Han et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2010). This lack of integrated analysis constrains the ability of public institutions to develop evidence-based strategies for proactive and effective crisis communication.

To address these gaps, the present study examines media framing and organizational

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responses to crises within public institutions, with the objective of identifying patterns, alignment, and potential areas for enhancing communication effectiveness. The research explores how different types of media frames influence institutional response strategies and how these strategies affect public perception and trust. By combining content analysis of media reports with evaluation of institutional responses, this study offers a novel, integrated framework for understanding crisis communication in public institutions. The findings are expected to contribute to both theory and practice by providing insights into improving responsiveness, transparency, and public confidence during crises.

METHOD

This study employs a mixed-method approach to examine crisis communication in public institutions, focusing on media framing and organizational responses during crises. The research investigates how media narratives influence institutional response strategies and how these responses impact public perception and trust.

Research Design

A descriptive-explanatory design is used to capture both the content of media reports and the responses of public institutions. Quantitative content analysis is conducted on media coverage to classify types of framing, while qualitative interviews and document analysis are conducted with institutional communication officers to understand response strategies and decision-making processes.

Population and Sample

The population consists of media articles and social media posts reporting public crises, as well as communication units within public institutions that managed these crises. Purposive sampling is applied to select high-impact cases with sufficient media coverage and documented institutional responses. The sample includes approximately 50 media reports and 10 institutional response cases from multiple public agencies.

Data Collection

Data collection combines two main approaches. First, media content is collected through online databases and official media websites, including news articles, press releases, and social media posts. Second, institutional responses are collected through interviews with

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communication officers, review of press statements, and internal reports. Triangulation of these sources enhances the reliability and validity of the findings.

Variables and Focus

The main variables include media framing types (responsibility, human interest, conflict, moral, etc.) and institutional response characteristics (speed, strategy, communication channels, and message content). The study also examines the alignment between media framing and the appropriateness of institutional responses as perceived by the public.

Data Analysis

Quantitative content analysis is performed using coding schemes to categorize media framing. Qualitative data from interviews and documents are analyzed thematically to extract patterns in institutional response strategies. The integration of quantitative and qualitative results allows for a comprehensive assessment of the interaction between media framing and organizational responses. The figure illustrates the research process, including media content collection, institutional response analysis, coding of frames, and integration of findings for comprehensive interpretation.

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Figure 1. Research Flowchart

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents a detailed analysis of the study findings on crisis communication in public institutions. The focus is on media framing and institutional responses. The analysis integrates quantitative content analysis of 142 official messages and 612 media responses with qualitative insights from communication officers. It follows the research flow depicted in the methodology, providing a comprehensive view of how official communication aligns with media narratives and affects public perception and trust. Table 1 summarizes the primary purpose, message strategy, tone, and communication channels used in official crisis messages. This table provides insights into institutional communication priorities and strategic approaches.

Table 1. Characteristics of Official Crisis Communication Messages

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Primary Purpose	Informing	58	40.8
Message Strategy	Responsive	67	47.2
Tone	Empathetic	64	45.1
Communication Channel	Press Release	56	39.4

From Table 1, it is evident that the majority of official messages were intended primarily to inform the public, reflecting a strong institutional emphasis on transparency, accountability, and timely dissemination of critical information during crises. The prevalence of the responsive strategy indicates that public institutions prioritized adaptive communication, actively addressing emerging developments, inquiries, and uncertainties as they unfolded. This demonstrates that institutions not only aimed to provide information but also sought to maintain control over the narrative, mitigating misinformation and clarifying ambiguities.

The empathetic tone dominating the messages underscores a deliberate effort to convey concern and reassurance, thereby fostering public trust and strengthening institutional legitimacy. The reliance on press releases as the primary communication channel highlights the continued importance of formal, authoritative sources, while the supplementary use of social media demonstrates an understanding of the need for immediacy, broader reach, and interactive engagement with the public. This combination of channels suggests a hybrid communication strategy that balances formal institutional authority with the accessibility and responsiveness of digital media.

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Table 2, which presents the frequency and percentage of different media frames across 612 media reports, provides additional insight into how the public narrative is constructed and the specific aspects of the crisis that receive attention. The distribution of media frames reveals the dimensions of the crisis emphasized by external actors, shaping public perception and potentially influencing institutional response strategies. Analyzing these frames in conjunction with the official messages allows for the identification of alignment or gaps between institutional intent and public interpretation, highlighting areas where communication strategies could be further refined to optimize effectiveness, credibility, and public trust.

Table 2. Distribution of Media Frames in Media Coverage

Frame Type	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Responsibility	220	36
Human Interest	170	28
Conflict	130	21
Economic Consequence	92	15

Responsibility frames were the most frequently used across the 612 media reports, signaling strong media focus on institutional accountability and the scrutiny of actions taken during crises. This prevalence suggests that public attention is primarily directed toward evaluating whether institutions meet their obligations and act responsibly, emphasizing the importance of timely and accurate official communication. Human interest frames, which focus on personal stories or social impact, were also prominent, drawing empathy and engagement from the public and highlighting the human dimension of crisis events. Conflict frames, though less frequent, underscore media emphasis on disputes, controversies, or institutional disagreements arising during the crisis, reflecting a dimension that may intensify public concern or highlight organizational challenges. Economic consequence frames were the least common but serve to bring attention to financial and resource-related implications of the crisis, offering a perspective on accountability and potential operational impact.

These patterns suggest that institutions need to adopt multi-angle communication strategies that address diverse public concerns while aligning with the predominant media narratives. Table 3 presents the extent to which official messages corresponded with dominant media frames, providing insight into the effectiveness of institutional messaging. The alignment analysis indicates that while some messages were fully consistent with media framing, others only

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partially aligned or were misaligned, revealing gaps in communication strategy that may influence public perception and trust. A nuanced understanding of these frame-response dynamics allows institutions to refine messaging strategies, enhance message clarity, and ensure that communication objectives effectively address public expectations and scrutiny across different narrative dimensions.

Table 3. Alignment Between Official Messages and Media Frames

Alignment Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Aligned	43	30.3
Partially Aligned	62	43.7
Misaligned	37	26.0

The alignment analysis reveals that only 30.3% of official messages were fully aligned with media frames, while 43.7% were partially aligned and 26% were misaligned. This indicates a substantial communication gap that could undermine public trust, affect perceptions of institutional competence, and limit the effectiveness of crisis communication. The partial alignment highlights specific areas where messaging could be refined to better address the dominant media narratives, ensuring a more coherent and consistent public understanding of institutional actions during crises.

In summary, the detailed examination of Tables 1 to 3 demonstrates that, although public institutions generally employ informative and responsive communication strategies with an empathetic tone, significant gaps remain in alignment with media framing. The findings emphasize the need for proactive and strategic management of media narratives, including monitoring emerging frames and adapting institutional messages accordingly. Integrating quantitative content analysis with qualitative insights provides a holistic understanding of crisis communication effectiveness. These insights can inform actionable recommendations, such as adjusting message timing, enhancing clarity, and tailoring content to address key public concerns, ultimately improving institutional credibility and fostering greater public trust during crises.

This study provides several significant findings that contribute to the literature on crisis communication in public institutions. Firstly, it demonstrates the direct mechanism by which media framing influences institutional response strategies, highlighting the dynamic interaction between media narratives and official messaging. Secondly, the study identifies a measurable alignment gap, revealing that only 30.3% of messages are fully aligned with media frames,

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providing quantitative evidence of communication challenges in real-world crises. Thirdly, the integration of quantitative content analysis with qualitative insights from communication officers allows for a comprehensive understanding of both message effectiveness and institutional decision-making processes, a methodological novelty compared to prior studies.

Table 4. Novelty and Key Findings Summary

Key Finding	Significance / Novelty
Media framing impacts institutional response	Demonstrates direct mechanism of media-influenced communication strategies
Alignment gap between messages and media frames	Quantifies the communication gap with 30.3% full alignment
Integration of quantitative and qualitative data	Methodological novelty offering comprehensive insights into effectiveness and decision-making

Figure 2. Conceptual Summary of Novel Findings

The framework highlights several key components. Inputs include contextual factors such as crisis type, public expectations, and organizational resources. The central process stage shows how institutions construct and disseminate messages, interact with media frames, and adapt strategies based on ongoing feedback. Output variables capture the alignment between institutional messages and media frames, while outcomes focus on public perception, trust, and institutional credibility. The feedback loops incorporated in the framework demonstrate continuous learning and adjustment, indicating that effective crisis communication is not static but evolves in response to media coverage and public reactions. This framework also underscores the novelty of the study by explicitly linking media framing to institutional strategy adaptation, providing both theoretical and practical guidance for public sector crisis communication management.

CONCLUSION

This study provides an in-depth examination of crisis communication in public institutions, focusing on the interaction between media framing and institutional responses. The analysis demonstrates that while public institutions generally employ informative, responsive, and

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empathetic messaging strategies, alignment with dominant media frames is partial, with only 30.3% of messages fully aligned. This gap highlights the need for more proactive monitoring and strategic adaptation to media narratives to ensure consistency, credibility, and trust during crises.

The conceptual framework developed in this study illustrates the dynamic mechanisms through which media framing influences institutional responses, and how these responses, in turn, affect public perception and trust. Feedback loops embedded in the framework emphasize the importance of continuous learning and iterative refinement in crisis communication strategies. By integrating quantitative content analysis with qualitative insights from communication officers, the study provides a holistic understanding of communication effectiveness and identifies critical points where alignment can be improved.

The study makes both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it extends existing crisis communication models by explicitly linking media framing to adaptive institutional strategies. Practically, it offers actionable guidance for public institutions, including monitoring emerging media frames, refining message content, and selecting appropriate channels to reach diverse audiences effectively. Implementing these strategies can enhance transparency, maintain public confidence, and improve institutional credibility in times of crisis.

In summary, integrating awareness of media framing with strategic, responsive messaging provides a robust approach for managing public perception and trust during crises. The findings offer empirical evidence and practical insights, highlighting the value of an adaptive, feedback-informed framework for effective crisis communication in public institutions.

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