

The Evolution of Political Communication in Crisis and Disaster

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Abstract

Political communication during crises and disasters has undergone a profound transformation, evolving from state-controlled propaganda to the real-time, fragmented, and interactive digital exchanges of the modern era. This article comprehensively traces this evolution, examining foundational strategies from historical conflicts and early disasters, the paradigm shift introduced by broadcast media, the disruptive role of social media, and the emergent challenges of artificial intelligence (AI) and misinformation. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature and case studies from the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and climate-related disasters, it analyzes how political leaders leverage communication for crisis management, public engagement, and narrative control. Crucially, the analysis extends to both open democracies and states with strict information control, providing a holistic global perspective. It also scrutinizes the powerful, often unacknowledged role of social media platforms as digital gatekeepers whose algorithmic designs exacerbate polarization. Key findings indicate that while digital tools offer unprecedented speed and responsiveness, they simultaneously amplify misinformation, deepen political divides, and create new vulnerabilities for societal cohesion. The effectiveness of crisis communication is shown to be contingent not only on the channel but on the political context, leadership style, and, most importantly, public trust. The article concludes by emphasizing the urgent need for robust ethical frameworks, enhanced digital literacy, and regulatory innovation to mitigate AI-driven risks and fortify democratic resilience.

Keywords: political communication, crisis management, disasters, social media, misinformation, infodemic, artificial intelligence, COVID-19, populism, democratic resilience

1. Introduction

Political communication is the strategic process through which leaders, governments, and institutions disseminate and manage information to influence public opinion, mobilize collective action, and maintain or contest legitimacy, particularly during periods of intense uncertainty and threat (Lilleker et al., 2021). In the context of crises and disasters—defined here as sudden, disruptive events that overwhelm a community's capacity to cope, such as wars, pandemics, terrorist attacks, or natural hazards (Quarantelli, 2005)—this communicative function becomes paramount. It is the essential mechanism for coordinating emergency responses, alleviating public fear, providing actionable guidance, and framing the overarching narrative of the event (Olsson & Nord, 2015).

Historically, this communication was a top-down, unidirectional process mediated by a limited number of state-influenced channels. However, globalization and relentless technological advancement have radically democratized the information landscape, introducing both unprecedented opportunities and profound vulnerabilities. The objectives of crisis communication are multifaceted. According to Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), a primary goal is to protect the reputation and legitimacy of the organization or government involved (Coombs, 2007). Beyond image repair, it serves an instructional function (telling people how to protect themselves), an informational function (providing details about the event), and a meaning-making function (helping the public understand the crisis within a broader social or political context).

This article provides a comprehensive review of the evolution of political communication in crises, structured both chronologically and thematically to illuminate key paradigm shifts. It begins by exploring the historical foundations, tracing how early modern conflicts and disasters established templates for state-centric messaging. It then analyzes the broadcast era, where television reshaped the political landscape, creating new pressures for immediacy and visual accountability. The subsequent section delves into the digital revolution, dissecting the disruptive impact of social media, which transformed citizens from passive recipients to active participants. The analysis adopts a deliberately comparative lens, examining strategies in both open democracies and states with strict information control to reveal how political

culture dictates responses to shared technological challenges. Finally, it synthesizes these insights to argue that the efficacy of crisis communication is fundamentally a political, not merely a technological, issue, contingent on pre-existing public trust and the resilience of the informational ecosystem.

2. Historical Development of Political Communication in Crises

The modern forms of political communication during crises were forged in the crucible of major wars and the nascent administrative states of the 19th and 20th centuries. This period was characterized by a state monopoly over information, a focus on national unity, and the use of communication as a tool of power.

2.1 *The Dawn of Centralized Communication: War and State-Building*

The roots of systematic crisis communication can be traced to military conflicts. During the American Civil War, the Lincoln administration's use of the telegraph allowed for unprecedented speed in disseminating military directives and shaping news narratives, marking a shift toward a national politics of disaster (Davies, 2014). World War I witnessed the industrialization of propaganda, with governments establishing formal agencies to craft messages that demonized the enemy and censored dissenting voices, cementing communication as a weapon of war.

World War II represented the apotheosis of this model. Leaders like Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill mastered radio to forge a direct bond with citizens. Roosevelt's "fireside chats" used a calm, paternal tone to explain complex policies, assuage fears, and galvanize support for the war, building immense public trust (Baum & Groeling, 2010). In totalitarian regimes, this power was taken to its extreme, as Joseph Goebbels in Nazi Germany orchestrated a pervasive propaganda machine to enforce ideological conformity—a historical precursor to contemporary strategies in highly controlled states. This early era established a clear template: crisis communication was a top-down instrument for mobilizing populations and legitimizing state action, with minimal public feedback.

2.2 *Natural Disasters as Political Theaters*

Natural disasters also became critical sites for political communication, shifting from "acts of God" to events mediated by political accountability. The 1906 San Francisco earthquake was politicized through media coverage that assigned blame to corrupt governance, fueling a powerful reform movement (Rozario, 2007). This established disasters as moments of political reckoning.

This politicization intensified during the Cold War, where disaster response became a form of public diplomacy. The provision of international aid became a tool for projecting soft power and ideological superiority. Following the 1970 Ancash earthquake in Peru, both superpowers competed to deliver aid, using communication to highlight their generosity and win influence (Pelling & Dill, 2010). This period also revealed a stark contrast in communication philosophies: in the Soviet bloc, disaster communication was tightly managed to project an image of state competence and socialist solidarity, while Western nations, though still controlling narratives, operated within a more open and contested media environment. This divergence foreshadowed the contemporary divide in crisis communication strategies between information-control regimes and open societies.

3. Transition to Broadcast Media and Institutional Frameworks

The mid-20th century marked a pivotal shift with the rise of broadcast media, particularly television, which transformed political communication from a managed monologue into a visually charged, public dialogue that could challenge official narratives.

3.1 *The "Living Room War" and the CNN Effect*

The Vietnam War, dubbed the "living room war," was the first conflict to receive extensive, uncensored television coverage. Graphic images of combat starkly contrasted with official U.S. government narratives, eroding public support and creating a persistent "credibility gap" (Hallin, 1986). This dynamic fundamentally altered the power balance between the state and media. The phenomenon was later turbocharged by 24-hour cable news, creating the "CNN effect," where real-time global coverage compelled political leaders to react more swiftly to international crises, often dictating the policy agenda. Political communication was no longer just about responding to events but about being seen to respond within a news cycle measured in hours.

The 2005 Hurricane Katrina catastrophe was a watershed moment in the broadcast era. The delayed and chaotic U.S. federal government response was captured in excruciating detail by television, with media frames powerfully portraying government incompetence and deep-seated racial inequality (Tierney et al., 2006). The political fallout was devastating, underscoring that in the broadcast era, perception is reality, and communication failures can be as damaging as operational ones. The visual power of television made crisis management a performative act under constant public scrutiny.

3.2 *The Institutionalization and Cultural Variation of Crisis Communication*

In response to these pressures, Western governments formalized their crisis communication apparatus. In the United States, the creation and refinement of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) emphasized principles of transparency, accuracy, and coordination through frameworks like the National Incident Management System (NIMS) (Sylves, 2019). The role of the public information officer (PIO) became a specialized profession dedicated to managing the interface between institutions and the public.

Comparative research, however, reveals significant cultural and political variations that temper this institutional model. In many East Asian contexts, such as Mainland China, crisis communication is heavily influenced by Confucian values emphasizing social harmony, stability, and deference to authority. Consequently, government communication prioritizes narrative control, censorship, and the preservation of social order over pluralistic debate and immediate transparency (Cheng, 2016). A clear example is the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, where the Chinese government initially allowed unprecedented media access to showcase rescue efforts but quickly reasserted control when reporting shifted to critiques of shoddy school construction, illustrating how deep-seated political norms ultimately shape the boundaries of permissible discourse during a crisis.

4. **The Digital Revolution: Social Media as Primary Gatekeeper**

The rise of social media platforms represents the most significant disruption to political communication since the printing press, transforming it into a decentralized, bidirectional, and instantaneous process where citizens are active participants and platforms wield unprecedented gatekeeping power.

4.1 *The New Architecture of Crisis Communication*

Social media collapsed the traditional distance between leaders, legacy media, and the public, enabling disintermediation. Political leaders can now communicate directly with millions of followers in an unfiltered manner, as seen with figures like Donald Trump and Narendra Modi. Theoretical models like the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model recognize that citizens actively seek, share, and interpret information from their social networks, creating a complex, multi-layered information flow that bypasses official channels (Austin et al., 2012).

The prosocial potential of this architecture is well-documented. During the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami, social media became a vital tool for citizen-led coordination, missing-person searches, and support (Hjorth & Kim, 2011). Studies during the COVID-19 pandemic found that government social media posts emphasizing collective identity and gratitude effectively boosted citizen compliance with public health measures (Lee et al., 2022). This represents the optimistic vision of digital tools fostering resilient, self-organizing communities.

4.2 *The Dual-Use Dilemma: Platforms, Misinformation, and Polarization*

Despite these benefits, social media is a fertile ground for the "infodemic"—an overabundance of information, both accurate and not, that makes it hard to find trustworthy sources (Zarocostas, 2020). Misinformation and disinformation flourish in high-anxiety crisis environments, exacerbated by algorithmic amplification which prioritizes engaging, often emotionally charged content (Pentina & Tarafdar, 2021).

Crucially, social media firms now function as **primary gatekeepers** of political discourse. Their core business models—reliant on algorithmic systems optimizing for high engagement and rapid distribution—actively reward polarizing and sensational crisis content. This mechanistic design exacerbates political polarization and accelerates misinformation, creating self-reinforcing "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles" that insulate users from opposing viewpoints and factual corrections. Exposure to curated political outrage on these platforms significantly increases political cynicism, eroding the trust in democratic institutions that is essential for effective crisis response (Weeks & Holbert, 2024).

4.3 *Synthesis Across Political Contexts*

The digital era has created a unified technological challenge—the rampant spread of misinformation—but political culture dictates the nature of the response and the primary risk faced. **In Western democracies**, the core risk is **digital fragmentation** and the **erosion of trust in institutions**. The decentralized nature of social media fuels contested narratives, as seen in the intense politicization of COVID-19 mask mandates and vaccines in the United States, which led to fragmented public compliance based on political affiliation (Green et al., 2021).

By contrast, in states with strict information control (e.g., China, Russia), the core risk is a **breakdown of the singular, state-approved narrative**. While these regimes employ sophisticated censorship and propaganda tools, decentralized platforms can create moments of transparency where citizens share conflicting, observable reality. For instance, during the initial phases of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, the Chinese government's focus on **narrative stability** was momentarily challenged by the rapid, private sharing of videos and firsthand accounts via platforms like WeChat, illustrating the limits of **top-down control** in the face of instantaneous digital peer-to-peer exchange (Chen et al., 2021).

This comparison highlights a central paradox: while Western systems suffer from **too much contested information**, control regimes are vulnerable when **state-approved information is contradicted by collective digital testimony**.

Table 1. Comparison of Traditional vs. Social Media in Crisis Communication

Aspect	Traditional Media (Broadcast Era)	Social Media (Digital Era)
Speed	Delayed (hours/days)	Instantaneous, real-time
Interactivity	Low (one-way broadcast)	High (bidirectional, participatory)
Gatekeeping	High (professional journalists, editors)	Low/Algorithmic (anyone can publish)
Authority	Centralized in official sources	Decentralized, contested
Primary Risks	State censorship, media bias	Misinformation, polarization, infodemics

5. Case Studies: Political Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a global stress test for modern political communication, starkly revealing the consequences of different leadership strategies and the toxic interplay between politics and misinformation.

5.1 The Populist Playbook in a Public Health Crisis

Populist leaders consistently politicized the pandemic, framing public health measures as ideological battles over freedom versus government overreach. In the United States, President Donald Trump repeatedly downplayed the virus's severity, promoted unproven treatments, and publicly clashed with scientific experts, sowing widespread confusion and systematically undermining the credibility of federal health agencies (Sweetser, 2021). Similar patterns emerged in Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro and in India under Narendra Modi, where official communication often prioritized political, nationalist, or religious agendas over consistent, science-based public health guidance (Lilleker et al., 2021; Sreedharan, 2021). This approach transformed a public health crisis into a crisis of political trust, directly impacting compliance and outcomes.

5.2 Empathetic, Science-Based Leadership as a Counter-Model

In contrast, leaders who embraced empathetic, transparent, and science-led communication achieved notably higher public trust and compliance. New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern used frequent, informal Facebook Live sessions to speak directly to citizens with clarity and compassion, explicitly acknowledging public anxiety. Her government's consistent "go hard, go early" messaging fostered a strong sense of national unity and collective purpose (Craig, 2021). Similarly, Taiwan's response, led by President Tsai Ing-wen, combined technocratic efficiency with transparent communication, using daily briefings and digital tools to disseminate accurate information and quickly counter rumors, thereby building a resilient shield of public trust that prevented a large-scale outbreak.

5.3 The Infodemic and Digital Fragmentation

The pandemic was accompanied by a virulent parallel "infodemic." Studies of Twitter (now X) discourse identified highly polarized communities with minimal cross-cutting interaction. Conservative-leaning clusters were found to be more likely to share conspiracy theories (e.g., 5G, lab-leak narratives) and anti-vaccine content, while liberal-leaning clusters shared content emphasizing institutional trust and scientific consensus (Green et al., 2021). This digital fragmentation had dire real-world consequences, with vaccination rates and compliance with measures like masking strongly correlating with political affiliation in the U.S. This demonstrates conclusively that a fractured, algorithmically-driven information ecosystem is not merely a political problem but a direct threat to public health and safety.

6. Emerging Challenges and Future Trends: AI, Misinformation, and Beyond

The crisis communication landscape continues to evolve at a breakneck pace, shaped by the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence and deepening societal polarization.

6.1 The Age of Generative AI and Synthetic Media

Generative AI models like large language models (LLMs) and image generators present a dual-edged reality. Positively, they offer powerful tools for crisis managers: AI-powered chatbots can handle vast volumes of citizen queries, while natural language processing can analyze social media to detect emerging rumors and misinformation trends. However, they also pose an existential threat to the informational commons by enabling the production of sophisticated, tailored disinformation—convincing text, deepfake videos, and cloned audio—at an unprecedented scale and low cost (Simon et al., 2024). This creates a "liar's dividend," where the mere existence of deepfakes allows malicious actors to dismiss genuine evidence as fake, and vastly complicates the task of real-time verification during fast-moving emergencies (Goldstein et al., 2025).

6.2 The Politicization of Everything

Political polarization has intensified to the point where virtually no crisis remains non-partisan. Even naturally occurring events like hurricanes or wildfires are immediately subsumed into partisan warfare, with competing narratives focusing

on blame (e.g., climate policy negligence vs. poor local governance) rather than cooperative solutions. A hypothetical 2025 feud between a U.S. president and a state governor over disaster response, playing out over social media, illustrates how discourse quickly fractures along pre-existing lines, eroding the potential for a unified, effective response (Nicholson, 2025). This environment makes consensus-building and trust-based communication increasingly difficult.

6.3 Future Resilience Strategies: A Multi-Pronged Approach

Combating these interconnected challenges requires a sophisticated, multi-level strategy that moves beyond mere technological fixes:

- **Platform Regulation and Design:** Implementing regulatory mandates for algorithmic transparency and "epistemic security" features, such as friction-sharing (slowing the spread of unvetted content) and prominent contextual labels for AI-generated material.
- **Enhancing Digital and AI Literacy:** Integrating critical thinking about algorithms, source verification, and the hallmarks of synthetic media into educational curricula as essential 21st-century civic skills (Altay et al., 2024).
- **Proactive Government Communication (Prebunking):** Borrowing from inoculation theory, governments and trusted institutions can proactively warn the public about likely misinformation narratives before they go viral, building cognitive resistance.
- **Developing Ethical Frameworks for AI:** Establishing global norms and technical standards against the malicious use of synthetic media in crises, coupled with transparency protocols for when and how AI tools are used in official communication.

7. Discussion

Synthesizing this historical trajectory from centralized propaganda to algorithmic fragmentation reveals one enduring lesson: the efficacy of political crisis communication is not fundamentally a technological issue, but a political one. Its success is ultimately determined by the pre-existing reservoir of public trust in governmental institutions, scientific expertise, and the media. Technology acts as a powerful amplifier—it can magnify trust and coordination, as seen in Taiwan and New Zealand, or it can amplify distrust and fragmentation, as seen in the U.S. and Brazil.

This analysis crystallizes a global dichotomy in communication challenges (summarized in Table 2). Open democracies grapple with the centrifugal forces of a fragmented public sphere, where misinformation and polarization can paralyze collective action. Their challenge is to rebuild authoritative, trusted voices within a pluralistic, often adversarial, system. Information-control regimes, while often maintaining narrative stability in the short term, face the fundamental, long-term challenge of maintaining public trust when their singular, state-approved narrative is persistently contradicted by the observable reality experienced and shared by citizens digitally. Their vulnerability lies in the credibility gap that opens when the controlled narrative fails to match lived experience.

The digital era has thus created a profound paradox: the very tools that offer leaders immediate, direct reach to the public simultaneously erode the shared factual basis necessary for those same citizens to agree on the nature of a crisis and the appropriate collective action. In this environment, technology platforms, as the new gatekeepers, play an unacknowledged constitutional role. Their design choices—what they amplify, suppress, and connect—actively shape political reality and societal resilience during times of crisis.

Table 2. The Global Dichotomy of Crisis Communication Challenges

Political Context	Primary Communication Challenge	Core Vulnerability	Typical Response Strategy
Open Democracies	Digital fragmentation & contested narratives	Erosion of trust in institutions & expertise	Transparency, engagement, fact-checking, prebunking
Information-Control Regimes	Breakdown of singular state narrative	Credibility gap when narrative mismatches reality	Censorship, narrative control, co-option of digital platforms

8. Conclusion

The evolution of political communication in crisis is a story of accelerating change and escalating complexity. The journey from Roosevelt's unifying fireside chats to the fragmented, suspicion-laden realities of the COVID-19 infodemic illustrates a fundamental transformation in the nature of power, authority, and public trust. While digital tools offer unprecedented opportunities for situational awareness, public engagement, and rapid response, they have also systemically amplified societal vulnerabilities, supercharging misinformation and embedding polarization into the architecture of public discourse.

The emergent challenges of AI-driven disinformation and the "politicization of everything" demand solutions that are as much social and political as they are technical. They require a concerted, multi-stakeholder effort to rebuild the

foundations of public trust, advance universal digital and AI literacy, implement thoughtful and adaptive regulation, and develop robust ethical frameworks for the use of technology in public life.

Ultimately, navigating the paradoxes of the modern information environment—harnessing its democratizing and mobilizing potential while defending against its centrifugal and corrupting forces—is the central task for political communicators, policymakers, and scholars in the coming decade. Strengthening the resilience of democratic communication systems is not an abstract academic exercise; it is an essential prerequisite for effective governance, coherent collective action, and a functioning society in an age of permacrisis.

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Authors contributions

Saleh Abied Alrached was fully responsible for the study conception, the comprehensive literature review, the analysis of case studies, drafting of the original manuscript, and all revisions. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

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