Disaster Communication as Governance: A Dual-Level Model of Meaning and Information Management

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Abstract: *Disaster communication is now recognized as a key part of governance; however, its strategic elements remain underdeveloped, particularly outside of Western contexts. This study seeks to address this gap by reframing disaster communication not merely as reactive information transfer but as a strategic governance tool embedded in public administration.*

Using a systematic literature review, the paper synthesizes interdisciplinary frameworks from public relations, crisis communication, and political science to develop an integrated model of strategic disaster communication governance. The analysis presents a dual-level framework that distinguishes between the strategic management of meaning, which shapes public interpretation through framing and stakeholder alignment, and the tactical management of information, which oversees the processing and dissemination of data.

The findings show that effective disaster communication requires a shift from reactive, top-down information dissemination to proactive, two-way, symmetrical governance. Reinterpreting the RACE model as a governance cycle that links strategic orientation to tactical execution underscores the importance of systematic planning, stakeholder mapping, and adaptive communication processes for managing both meaning and information.

Furthermore, the paper argues that communication should be treated as a public good, essential to maintaining institutional legitimacy and promoting long-term community resilience, particularly within centralized governance frameworks such as Vietnam's. In the digital era, integrating dialogic, two-way communication mechanisms is crucial for sustaining public trust and enhancing the effectiveness of disaster management efforts.

Keywords: *crisis management, strategic communication, disaster communication, crisis communication.*

1. Introduction

In Vietnam, natural calamities have historically ranked alongside fire and war as the most existential threats to societal survival, embodied in the traditional hierarchy of dangers: “Water, Fire, Robbery, and Invasion.” As global climate change accelerates the frequency and intensity of such events, robust disaster management systems are increasingly urgent for state stability and community resilience. Despite its critical importance, the communicative dimension of disaster management, specifically how governments strategically exchange information to mitigate harm, remains significantly under-researched and has often been neglected in favor of technical solutions. Existing studies are frequently Western-centric and fail to account for the complexities of heterogeneous socio-political structures, ignoring Vietnam’s centralized governance and cultural epistemologies. This paper addresses this gap by investigating the strategic governance of disaster communication.

Employing a literature review methodology, the study synthesizes interdisciplinary frameworks, ranging from public relations (Excellence theory and Situational Theory of Publics) and crisis management (RACE model) to political science, to construct a comprehensive model for governance. The analysis examines the interplay between internal leadership traits and external environmental determinants, such as centralized power structures and indigenous cultural epistemologies, in shaping communication at both strategic and tactical levels. The findings emphasize the importance of shifting from working “for the people” to working “with the people” to secure long-term stability. In the digital age, engaging in two-way, symmetrical dialogue on social media is essential for maintaining public trust and delivering strategic communication as a public good. The model provides valuable analytical insights for other centralized and hybrid governance systems.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a systematic literature review methodology to synthesize existing theoretical and empirical knowledge on disaster communication and strategic governance. Approximately 90 scholarly sources were meticulously selected from distinguished databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. These selections were grounded in their relevance to strategic communication, crisis communication, and disaster governance. The selection process adhered to a systematic screening methodology, emphasizing peer-reviewed publications and seminal literature, while deliberately excluding studies without adequate theoretical or contextual significance. Keywords such as “strategic communication,” “disaster communication,” "crisis communication," "government communication," and "public relations models" were used to search for documents. The review prioritized peer-reviewed journal articles, edited volumes, and governmental policy documents published within the last three decades, with seminal works included regardless of publication date. Studies were selected based on their relevance to strategic communication planning, public relations theory, and disaster or crisis governance. Data were analyzed thematically, with findings organized around two analytical levels, strategic (management of meaning) and tactical (management of information), to construct an integrated model of strategic disaster communication governance. This approach ensured both conceptual consistency and analytical depth in developing the proposed model.

3. Strategic Governance in Disaster Communication

3.1. Disaster Communication as a Governance Function

Disaster communication in this study is treated not as a peripheral or purely operational task but as a core governance function embedded in organizational management. It is grounded in the principle of purposeful action, whereby communication involves the deliberate use of messages, channels, and engagement strategies to achieve predefined organizational objectives. In this sense, disaster communication is inherently strategic, designed, directed, and implemented with clear objectives aligned with disaster management and public governance goals, and used as a deliberate instrument to pursue societal outcomes rather than as a reactive or incidental activity.

As a governance function, it involves representatives of public institutions who carry out structured, calculated activities to address socio-economic needs arising from disasters. Communication is thus an organized process, not merely the transmission of messages, and it contributes directly to disaster management by enabling institutions to anticipate, coordinate, and respond to complex challenges. A defining trait is its outcome-oriented nature: it is judged by its effectiveness in achieving concrete results, such as enhancing preparedness, enabling coordinated action, or reducing disaster impacts, rather than by the volume or frequency of messages, ensuring alignment with organizational objectives under crisis conditions.

This governance function also centers on the dual task of managing meaning and information. Disaster communication shapes how the public interprets events, through risk framing, narratives, and perception management, while simultaneously handling information systematically: gathering data, processing knowledge, and disseminating relevant content. These two dimensions are inseparable; effective communication requires both accurate information and the ability to guide its interpretation in specific social and cultural contexts.

The execution of this function follows systematic, structured processes rather than improvisation. Models such as RACE (Research, Action, Communication, Evaluation) illustrate this logic: research identifies problems and analyzes publics; action develops strategies and plans; communication implements them; and evaluation measures the extent to which objectives are achieved. This cyclical process underscores the managerial character of disaster communication, based on planning, execution, and continuous assessment.

Taken together, these five defining properties: purposeful use, the managerial and governance role, outcome orientation, the management of meaning and information, and systematic processes - establish disaster communication as a fully developed governance function. Through this lens, it becomes an integral part of disaster management, shaping both information flows and the broader dynamics of societal response and resilience.

3.2. Disaster Communication within Governmental Communication Systems

While disaster communication can be seen as a governance function in general organizational terms, its full significance becomes clear when placed within governmental communication systems, where it is closely tied to the roles, responsibilities, and institutional features of the state. In this context, disaster management, and thus disaster communication, is understood as a form of public goods provision. Disaster risk reduction is treated as an essential public good with non-excludable, collective benefits that require centralized, authoritative coordination; therefore, governments bear primary responsibility for delivering disaster-related information and communication, thereby reinforcing the state's central institutional role [19, p.25; 24, p.26].

This responsibility stems from the fundamental obligations of government. Governing disasters and reducing their impacts are among the state's core duties toward its territory and population, which makes disaster communication not optional but constitutive of state responsibility. It serves as a key instrument through which governments fulfill their mandate to protect citizens, maintain social order, and ensure collective safety. Its failure would signal a breakdown in central government functions, not merely a technical problem.

The institutional and public nature of governmental communication further distinguishes disaster communication from the practices in other sectors. Government communication is embedded in a public institutional context, directed toward external publics and expected to reflect societal will and interests. This outward orientation imposes specific expectations, such as transparency, inclusiveness, and responsiveness; thus, disaster communication must be designed not only to inform but also to align with broader societal values.

A defining trait of governmental communication is its high degree of political accountability [13, p.25]. Unlike private organizations, which are mainly accountable to internal stakeholders or markets, governments operate under continuous public scrutiny. Communication is evaluated by citizens, the media, and political actors; errors, inconsistencies, or delays can carry significant political consequences, especially during disasters, when attention is intense, and the stakes are high. Communication also serves as a critical mechanism for the operation of the policy apparatus in emergencies [1, p.24]. Government agencies rely on it to exchange information, coordinate actions, and implement decisions, turning policies into practice and enabling actors across the system to act coherently and quickly [15, p.25]. This operational role underscores the centrality of communication in governance, particularly under crisis conditions. Furthermore, while the aforementioned governance functions heavily emphasize structured managerial processes, the human element of leadership remains equally indispensable. In public administration literature, there is a clear demarcation between management and leadership. As Bass (2008) articulated, managerial activities are finitely directed to planning, organizing, and managing mechanical processes [2, p.24]. Leadership, on the other hand, aims to sketch a future organizational vision, inspire followers, and establish trust. Disasters are fundamentally environments of extreme uncertainty where rigid managerial processes can often fail if they lack the personal gravitas or charisma of a leader to stabilize public psychology. Therefore, within the proposed dual-level architecture, the two communication functions demand distinctly different capacities. *Managing Information* at the tactical level heavily relies on managerial capacity to execute systematic, mechanical procedures, such as data gathering, processing, and distribution through the RACE cycle. Conversely, *Managing Meaning* at the strategic level is inextricably linked to leadership qualities. To successfully frame a crisis, align stakeholder perceptions, and gather public consensus, institutions require the charismatic and inspirational presence of leaders who can navigate chaotic realities and effectively reassure the affected population.

In sum, situating disaster communication within governmental communication systems highlights its dual nature as a governance function and a core instrument of state responsibility. It reflects the provision of public goods, the fulfillment of fundamental governmental duties, the constraints of institutional and public contexts, the demands of political accountability, and the operational needs of policy implementation, thereby providing a comprehensive basis for understanding communication in disaster governance.

3.3. Strategic Disaster Communication

3.3.1. Conceptualizing

The concept of being "strategic" is recognized as intrinsic to professional communication, signifying that this practice is a management function involving deliberate engagement on behalf of organizations or social causes [14, p.25]. Broadly, strategic communication is defined as the "purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission." Within this framework, strategic crisis communication [18, p.25] could be understood as a communication governance process comprising several proactive activities: anticipating, preventing, preparing for, responding to, evaluating, and learning from a crisis [19, p.25].

The primary aim of this strategic approach is to minimize damage from threats to organizations' popularity, trust, and reputation [21, p.25]. This is particularly relevant when dealing with stakeholders who may seek to expand their scope and influence within the organization to achieve their own strategic goals during a crisis. In the specific domain of natural hazards, strategic disaster communication functions as a continuous governance process that manages both information (data processing) and meaning (how stakeholders perceive the event) to achieve the public interest.

The conceptual shift from crisis communication to strategic disaster communication represents a transition from reactive measures to an integrated approach to public management. Traditionally, crisis communication was often a reactive dialogue between an organization and its publics, initiated only after harm had occurred [14, p.25]. In contrast, the strategic perspective positions communication as a foremost executive function. This transition acknowledges that a single disaster can spawn multiple organizational crises, necessitating structured governance throughout the entire crisis lifecycle.

At the core of this strategy is the balancing of interests to establish a win-win relationship between the organization and its stakeholders. This strategy is directly connected to the two-way symmetrical model of communication, in which the goal is to build trust and maintain mutual understanding through an equal exchange of information. Unlike one-way models, such as propaganda or public information models, the symmetrical model fosters rational debate and a balance of power. By employing this ethical framework, disaster communication practitioners align their decisions with social responsibilities, ensuring that prioritizing individuals' welfare and safety preserves the organization's legitimacy [23, p.26].

3.3.2. Theories and Models

Communication strategy encompasses planned actions by organizations to obtain desired outcomes [11, p.25]. Disaster communication management planning typically follows a core sequence answering six fundamental questions: What is the real problem? (scanning the issue); What are the goals?; Who are the stakeholders (and what are the relationships with them)? What content to communicate?; How to communicate it? (tactics); How to measure results? (evaluation). This aligns with the RACE model (Research, Action, Communication, Evaluation), proposed by Marston (1979) as an early public relations framework [13, p.25].

Studies highlight the elements of effective disaster communication [5, p.24]. Organizations must develop strategies and tactics suited to their goals. In Hallahan et al. (2007), strategic communication is defined as the process of audience analysis, goal setting, message strategy, channel choice, and assessment [9, p.24]. Coombs (2017) identifies two key tasks: managing meaning (strategic level: identifying publics and using messages to shape awareness of the crisis and organization) and managing information (tactical level: gathering data, converting it to knowledge, and disseminating via appropriate channels) [6, p.24]. Botan (2006) proposes that an effective communication plan in public relations needs three levels of strategic planning: grand strategy, strategy, and tactics, as illustrated below [3. p.25].

Figure 1. Grand strategy, strategy, and tactics in public relations.

Source: Botan (2006) [3, p.24]

3.3.3. Strategic Level: Managing Meaning

Strategic communication management is understood as goal- and outcomes-focused [17, p.25]. Hallahan et al. (2007) define strategic communication as "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission," [9, p.24] emphasizing that strategic goals, aims (desired outcomes), and objectives are essential. From this base, leaders in disaster communication can identify the organization's public. Goals are typically broad, comprehensive value statements that guide decision-making in a disaster, help crisis managers stay focused on their aims, and may reduce the negative impacts of the crisis on affected people [24, p.26].

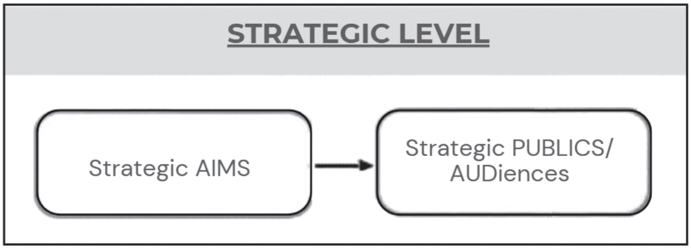

Figure 2. Strategic level of disaster communication.

Source: Author's depiction.

In disaster management, setting realistic aims and objectives is challenging, but Gregory (2015) argues that crisis managers can assess the size and nature of the communication task through analysis [8, p.24]. The European Commission (2015) identifies five types of communication aims for governmental communication [7, p.24]:

- *Persuade:* To persuade a person or group to do something they would otherwise not do.
- *Inform:* To provide basic information about a new policy, stance, service, regulation, or requirement, without necessarily prompting action.
- *Normalize:* To instill in people the sense that others are doing the same (e.g., taking precautions), or that there is a social expectation not to engage in certain behaviors.
- *Inspire:* To motivate people to start, continue, or stop doing something, often by triggering an emotional response.
- *Engage:* To involve people in an issue and encourage participation in a debate or activity through two-way dialogue.

Together, these strategic aim types represent the desired outcomes of the disaster communication response. They should be clearly defined before implementation, aligned with organizational aims, and formulated so that outcomes can be evaluated once the response concludes.

To ensure these strategic efforts are effective and actionable, leaders utilize the SMART goal standards. This framework requires that all communication objectives be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. By following these standards, disaster communication managers can create a clear roadmap that links specific interventions to the organization's value statements. Furthermore, Smith (2013) identifies three hierarchical levels of objectives [22, p.26] that must be addressed to influence public perception effectively:

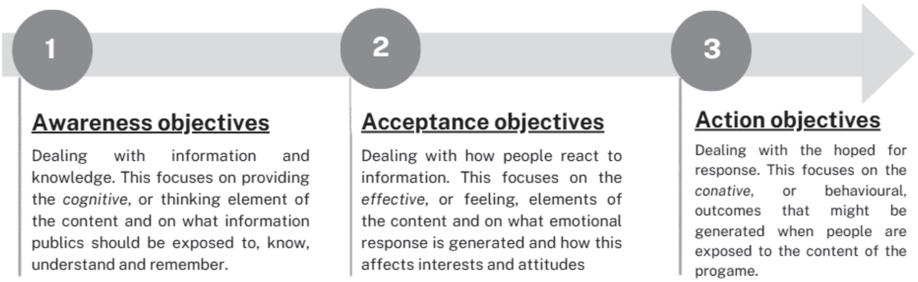

Figure 3. Three levels of objectives.

Source: Author's depiction based on Smith (2013) [22, p.26].

(1) Cognitive (Awareness): These objectives focus on providing information and knowledge, ensuring that the public is exposed to, understands, and remembers the critical elements of the disaster response.

(2) Affective (Acceptance): This level deals with the affective or emotional response of the public, aiming to influence attitudes and feelings toward the information provided, such as building solidarity or reducing panic.

(3) Conative (Action): The final level focuses on behavioral outcomes, encouraging the target audience to engage in specific actions, such as following evacuation orders or participating in reconstruction efforts.

While the three-tier objective framework outlines the psychological sequence of communication efforts, governmental organizations must further align these objectives with the specific demands of a catastrophic event. To conceptualize disaster communication specifically for the public sector, Olsson (2014) introduced a typology based on communication goals and orientations [16, p.25]. According to this framework, managing meaning forces public organizations to navigate two primary dimensions of disaster communication: (1) Strategic versus Operational and (2) Reputation-oriented versus Resilience-oriented. Operational communication traditionally focuses on distributing immediate, relevant information to vulnerable citizens, whereas strategic communication deals with long-term preparations and managerial targets. Concurrently, the reputation-oriented approach focuses on promoting the organization's framing to seek credibility and legitimacy, whereas the resilience-oriented approach emphasizes providing crucial information to help communities survive, adapt, and establish long-term stability. The intersection of these two axes generates four distinct conceptual types of disaster communication: (1) Operational resilience-oriented communication, which fosters self-sufficiency and provides emotional help; (2) Operational reputation-oriented communication; (3) Strategic reputation-oriented communication, which seeks to redress or boost the institutional image; and (4) Strategic resilience-oriented communication, which is designed specifically to enhance community resilience. By selecting a specific typological orientation, institutions explicitly define the exact "meaning" they intend to govern.

Once the specific typological orientation and objectives are established, practitioners employ the "Power-Influence" Matrix to identify the correct audience. This tool allows managers to scan the environment and classify stakeholders as strategic publics based on their level of interest and influence over the disaster management process. This mapping determines the most appropriate engagement method, whether it be active consultation for "key players" or simple information updates for those with lower influence.

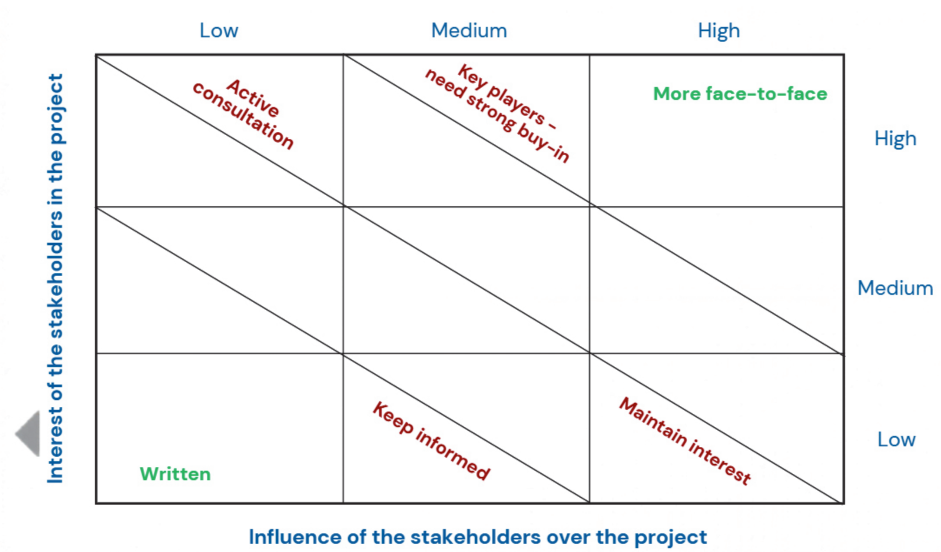

Figure 4. Stakeholder mapping by "Power-Influence" grid.

Source: European Commission (2015) [7, p.24].

While the Power-Influence matrix provides a macro-level categorization of stakeholders, effective disaster communication requires a more nuanced understanding of high-influence actors to explain the actual mechanisms of information flow. To deepen this mapping, Löffelholz et al. (2011) categorize strategic publics into three specific groups: decision-makers, multipliers, and the general public [12, p.25]. Among these, the "multipliers", such as key opinion leaders (KOLs), intellectuals, journalists, and local community leaders, serve an indispensable function. The operational mechanism of this group is best explained by the Two-step Flow theory of communication [10, p.24]. According to this theory, rather than communicating directly and uniformly with the entire mass audience, authorities strategically target high-influence multipliers. These opinion leaders first gather and absorb the official messages from mass media or governmental sources, and then relay, amplify, and navigate the intended “meaning” down to the broader, often more passive general public. By integrating this two-step technique into stakeholder mapping, crisis managers can more efficiently govern the meaning of a disaster, mitigate public panic, and align societal perception in highly uncertain environments.

Overall, the strategic level focuses on crisis managers’ aims to influence strategic publics through their disaster communication. At this level, strategy serves as a bridge between the aims and objectives of the communication program (what must be achieved) and the tactics (what must be done).

3.3.4. Tactical Level: Managing Information

While the strategic level focuses on meaning, the tactical level centers on managing information, which involves the technical processing of data and the selection of specific methods for transmitting it to the public. In Botan’s system, tactics are defined as the technical outputs, specific activities, and measurable methods used to execute the broader strategy.

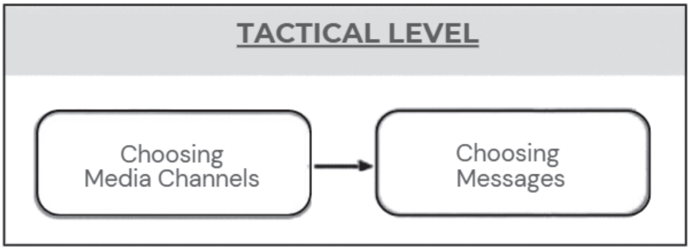

Figure 5. Tactical level of disaster communication.

Source: Author’s depiction

At this level, disaster communication practitioners must evaluate each potential intervention by asking two critical questions: first, is the tactic appropriate? Second, is the tactic deliverable? The first question ensures that the chosen method, whether it be a press conference, a social media campaign, or a community meeting, is credible and suited to the target audience. The second question addresses the feasibility of the tactic, considering available budgets, timelines, and the communication staff’s technical expertise.

To further refine this selection and categorize priorities, practitioners can utilize the methodology suggested by the Central Office of Information (COI). This technique employs a matrix based on two critical variables: power and interest. The underlying logic is that stakeholders with the highest levels of both variables demand the most attention, necessitating personalized, highly engaging communication. Conversely, those with low power and interest require the least attention and can be reached via non-personalized techniques. This approach classifies engagement into four specific strategies: Involve, Partner, Inform, and Consult.

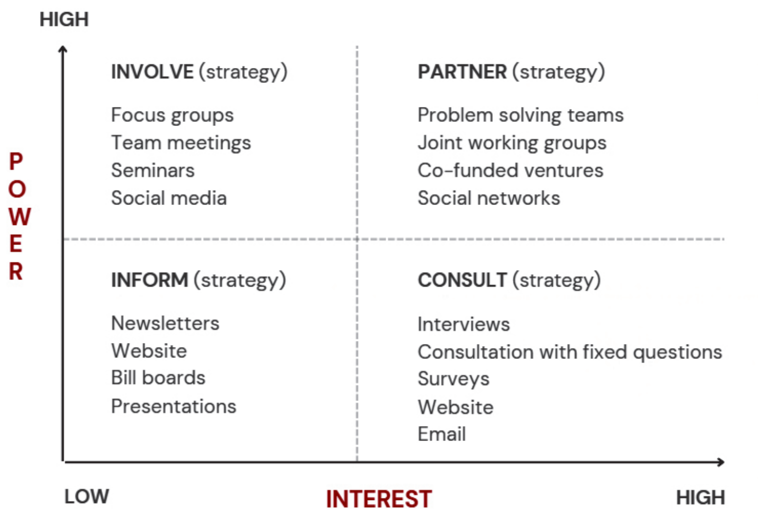

Figure 6. COI methodology for linking strategy and tactics.

Source: Gregory (2015) [8, p.24].

For specific messages sent during a disaster, practitioners must adhere to three core standards of response:

• Quick: The organization must act rapidly to fill the information vacuum created by the disaster. If an institution is slow to respond, other actors may take control of the narrative, leading to rumors and a loss of authority.

• Accurate: Information must be verified and precise to maintain institutional credibility. Providing inaccurate data during a crisis can permanently damage the governing body's reputation and endanger public safety.

• Consistent: To avoid confusion, the organization must ensure that all messages are unified, often by using authorized spokespersons to deliver consistent information across all channels.

While the criteria of being quick, accurate, and consistent dictate the *form* and delivery of crisis responses, the actual *content* of instructional disaster messages requires an equally robust theoretical framework. To address this, Sellnow and Sellnow (2010) conceptualized the IDEA model, which outlines four essential components for effective instructional risk and crisis communication: Internalization, Distribution, Explanation, and Action. According to this framework, *Internalization (I)* focuses on capturing and sustaining the public's attention by demonstrating the personal relevance of the impending risk to the affected community. *Distribution (D)* ensures that these instructional messages are conveyed via appropriate media channels that can maximize the chances of reaching the target public. *Explanation (E)* requires that information about the disaster be brief, easily understood by the audience, and presented alongside the internalization and action elements. Finally, *Action (A)* provides specific, actionable directives that empower the public to protect themselves and their families [20, p.25]. By adhering to this structural framework, crisis managers can effectively translate complex disaster data into practical, life-saving knowledge.

In conjunction with this structured content, a key technical maneuver used in the early stages of a disaster is the "Stealing the Thunder" strategy. This involves the organization proactively informing the public about an issue as soon as it is detected, rather than waiting for it to be revealed by the media or other critics. By being the first to disclose the problem, the organization can control the flow of information, frame the event more favorably, and significantly reduce the potential for reputational damage.

In summary, the tactical level of this communication approach focuses on the media channels used, the messages conveyed during a disaster, and the key characteristics of these messages. This level is linked to and follows the strategic level and the organization's overall strategy, aiming to make the best use of available resources to manage the disaster effectively. The integrated process of strategic disaster communication can be illustrated in the diagram below.

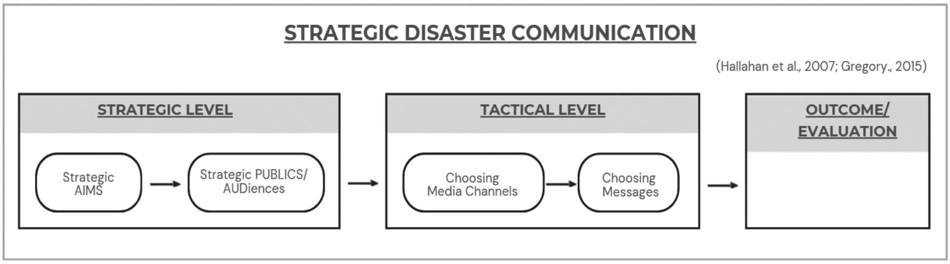

Figure 7. Integrated process of strategic disaster communication.

Source: Author's depiction.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Findings

The analysis provides three interconnected theoretical insights. The literature review yielded a comprehensive two-level framework for managing strategic disaster communication.

At the first level, disaster communication is treated as a fundamental governance function, defined by four core properties: deliberate use of communicative resources, a focus on outcomes, dual management of meaning and information, and adherence to systematic planning procedures.

At the second level, this governance function is split into two parts: a strategic component that handles goal-setting, stakeholder segmentation, and public perception management; and a tactical component that focuses on selecting communication channels, designing messages, and managing the dissemination of technical information.

Additionally, the synthesis further identifies the RACE model as the primary procedural framework linking both levels and the two-way symmetrical model as the normative standard guiding the relationship between government communicators and their publics. Collectively, these elements form a comprehensive model of strategic disaster communication suited to centralized governance contexts, including Vietnam.

4.2. Conceptual Model of Strategic Disaster Communication Governance

Model Structure: To formalize the theoretical contributions, Figure 8 presents the proposed model of strategic disaster communication governance.

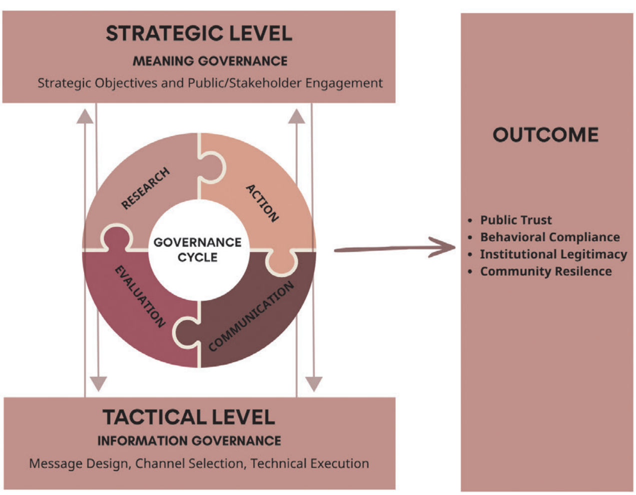

Figure 8: The strategic disaster communication governance model.

Source: Author's depiction

This model reconceptualizes disaster communication as a dynamic governance framework in which meaning and information are jointly created rather than handled in a linear sequence. It demonstrates the two-level structure of disaster-communication governance, combining the strategic management of meaning with the tactical management of information within a recursive governance cycle. This indicates that neither meaning nor information alone is sufficient; their impact depends on the governance system that manages communication.

The proposed model synthesizes the three dominant perspectives of crisis communication research identified by Schwarz and Löffelholz (2014): the institutional, the symbolic-relational, and the technical-instrumental perspectives [18, p.25]. By mapping these three meta-theoretical lenses onto the proposed framework, the model demonstrates a highly cohesive theoretical integration. First, the institutional perspective focuses on the relevant structural, cultural, and environmental variables at both macro and micro scales that impact crisis communication governance. It deals with organizational structures, political roles, and the distinct characteristics of public institutions. In the proposed model, this perspective corresponds directly to the overarching shell of "governance". It acts as the institutional structure that dictates how disaster communication is fundamentally administered, structured, and constrained within specific socio-political contexts. Second, the symbolic-relational perspective emphasizes the construction of meaning, the framing of messages, and the management of stakeholder relationships to protect organizational legitimacy. Scholars in this tradition argue that communication strategies are "symbolic resources" used to navigate social negotiations and influence public perceptions during a crisis. This perspective serves as the perfect theoretical anchor for the Strategic Level: Managing Meaning. It theoretically underpins how communication influences the interpretation of disasters through goal formulation, stakeholder identification, and framing. Finally, the technical-instrumental perspective investigates the characteristics, diffusion, implementation, and effectiveness of communication tools and tactical measures across different stages of a crisis. It scrutinizes the design of information systems and the utilization of media channels. This perspective aligns seamlessly with the Tactical Level: Managing Information. It provides the theoretical basis for how data and content are rapidly produced, processed, and consistently disseminated through specific channels to ensure multi-hazard situational awareness

The proposed model of strategic disaster communication governance is organized around two interconnected levels: the strategic management of meaning and the tactical management of information. At the strategic level, communication influences the interpretation of disasters through goal formulation, stakeholder identification, and framing. At the tactical level, communication focuses on the production and dissemination of information, necessitating promptness, accuracy, and consistency. These two levels work together in a recursive governance framework, where strategic directives guide tactical activities and communication results inform ongoing improvements.

The model incorporates a governance cycle grounded in the RACE framework, linking Research and Evaluation (strategic level) to Action and Communication (tactical level). The effectiveness of communication is evidenced by outcomes such as public trust, behavioral compliance, and institutional legitimacy, which in turn serve as feedback for ongoing adaptation.

4.3. Discussion

This research asserts that disaster communication should be regarded not merely as an auxiliary activity but as the essential tool for effective disaster management. Unlike simple message delivery, which is often reactive and focused solely on transmitting information, governance-oriented communication is proactive, designed to achieve specific goals and aligned with organizational objectives. In contexts with high political accountability, a failure in this area signifies a failure of state responsibility, not just a technical error. The study underscores a dual mandate: managing meaning and managing information. These roles must be integrated into a unified governance framework because they operate simultaneously throughout the disaster cycle and are fundamentally interconnected.

The RACE model, in particular, offers the most structurally coherent framework for organizing disaster communication governance at both analytical levels. Its cyclical architecture, Research, Action, Communication, and Evaluation, maps directly onto the governance mandate: Research grounds strategy in evidence on publics and environmental conditions; Action and Communication execute that strategy at the tactical level; and Evaluation feeds outcomes back into subsequent planning. The synthesis finds that Research and Evaluation are inherently strategic functions, whereas Action and Communication are primarily tactical, a distribution that has direct implications for role differentiation within governmental communication structures.

At the strategic level, the three-tier objective framework, cognitive, affective, and conative, defines the sequence for communication efforts: awareness must come first, followed by attitude formation, then behavioral compliance. Interventions that are launched too early, before the audience is prepared, are likely to be ineffective. The Power-Influence Matrix classifies stakeholders by aligning engagement levels with each group's power and interest, supporting the two-way symmetrical model's emphasis on relational, rather than one-size-fits-all, communication.

At the tactical level, speed, accuracy, and consistency are structurally interdependent: the absence of any one of these standards compromises the others. The "Stealing the Thunder" tactic addresses all three simultaneously by establishing institutional narrative authority before external actors can fill the information vacuum. In digital environments, where information diffusion is rapid and barriers to content production are low, one-way dissemination models are structurally inadequate. The synthesis indicates that dialogue-based communication, informed by continuous environmental scanning, is the governance response most consistent with the frameworks reviewed.

4.4. Theoretical Contributions

This study advances the theoretical understanding of disaster communication in three respects. First, it reframes disaster communication as a governance function rather than a communicative act, shifting the unit of analysis from messages and channels to institutional structures, mandates, and accountability relationships. This reframing integrates disaster communication into the broader literature on public governance and state responsibility, where communication is understood not as a support activity but as a constitutive element of governance itself. The framework proposed here, which grounds disaster communication in the logic of public goods provision and political accountability, extends existing crisis communication theory beyond its predominantly organizational and reputational focus toward a more explicitly political and institutional register.

Second, and more specifically, the two-level model, distinguishing the strategic management of meaning from the tactical management of information, offers a conceptually precise architecture that existing frameworks have not fully articulated. Prior models, including the RACE model in its original formulation, treat strategy and tactics as sequential phases rather than as analytically distinct governance functions that operate on different logics and require different organizational competencies. The present synthesis clarifies this distinction and proposes that the two levels must be designed and evaluated separately, even as they remain procedurally linked through the RACE cycle.

Third, integrating the two-way symmetrical model into a disaster governance framework helps close the gap between normative public relations theory and crisis communication practice. The symmetrical model has historically been criticized as idealistic in crisis contexts, where speed and authority are prioritized over dialogue. This study argues, based on the reviewed literature, that the distinction is false: two-way symmetrical communication is not in tension with authoritative and rapid responses but, in fact, is the condition under which such responses sustain their legitimacy over time. Institutions that maintain symmetrical communication throughout the disaster lifecycle, not only in the acute phase, are better positioned to retain public trust across repeated crisis events.

Methodologically, this study offers a structured approach to synthesizing the disaster communication literature by categorizing theoretical perspectives into two main analytical dimensions: the strategic management of meaning and the tactical management of information. This dual-level analytical approach facilitates a more systematic integration of public relations, crisis communication, and governance theories, which are often examined independently in current research. By applying this framework, the study demonstrates how complex communication processes can be broken down and restructured into a coherent governance-focused model.

4.5. Practical Implications for Vietnam in the Digital Era

The framework developed in this study has direct practical implications for disaster-communication governance in Vietnam, where the intersection of a centralized political system, high disaster frequency, and rapid digital transformation creates a distinctive governance challenge. Three sets of implications are identified.

The first set of implications concerns institutional design. The two-level model requires that strategic and tactical communication functions be formally separated within government structures, with dedicated personnel, defined mandates, and allocated resources at each level. In Vietnam's current system, disaster communication is often concentrated at the point of response, with insufficient investment in upstream strategic functions such as environmental scanning, public clarification, and objective-setting. Formalizing these functions and embedding the RACE model as the standard procedural logic would shift disaster communication from an improvised activity to a managed governance process. This institutionalization should extend across the vertical hierarchy of government, from central agencies to provincial and commune-level authorities, with clear protocols for interagency coordination and information flow.

The second implication concerns the management of meaning in digital environments. Vietnam's digital infrastructure has expanded rapidly, and social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Zalo, now serve as primary information channels for large segments of the population during disasters. This structural shift has two consequences for governance. On the one hand, it narrows the window in which authorities can establish narrative authority: information, whether accurate or not, circulates at speeds that outpace traditional institutional communication cycles. On the other hand, it gives governments direct, real-time access to public discourse, enabling continuous monitoring of how events are interpreted, where misinformation is spreading, and which publics require targeted engagement. The framework reviewed here indicates that authorities who exploit this monitoring capacity and respond to emerging interpretations, rather than simply broadcasting official positions, are better equipped to manage meaning effectively. The "Stealing the Thunder" tactic is particularly applicable in this context: proactive, early disclosure by authoritative governmental sources has been shown to reduce the credibility and reach of competing narratives, a dynamic that is structurally amplified in high-speed digital environments.

The third implication concerns the adoption of two-way symmetrical governance, the most substantial institutional change this study discusses. Vietnam's governmental communication has traditionally been mainly one-way and top-down, reflecting a centralized political system in which the state is the primary source of information and the public is primarily a receiver. The frameworks reviewed indicate that this approach is increasingly insufficient, not because it lacks authority, but because authority in digital settings is relational, grounded in responsiveness, transparency, and alignment between institutional messaging and public perception. Moving toward two-way governance involves investing in three key areas: real-time monitoring of public discussions, mechanisms to incorporate public feedback into communication strategies, and trained staff capable of managing dialogue rather than merely producing messages. These elements are essential for the iterative, adaptive communication approach outlined by the RACE model, especially needed during complex disaster responses. By developing these capacities, institutions can better handle disasters and foster the trust necessary for long-term community resilience.

5. Conclusion

In sum, this study establishes a governance-oriented theory of disaster communication by distinguishing the management of meaning from the management of information and treating them as two interconnected functions. It challenges the conventional view of crisis communication as solely message transmission and instead conceptualizes communication as the mechanism by which disasters are governed.

The model outlines three key implications: first, that disaster communication functions as a non-linear governance system; second, that meaning is crucial in shaping public response; and third, that the effectiveness of communication is structurally dependent on governance capacity. These insights are especially relevant in centralized, digitally advanced systems, where it is essential to balance authority with responsiveness.

Future research should aim to expand this conceptual framework through empirical validation across diverse governance contexts, including comparative studies and the integration of emerging factors such as multilingualism and artificial intelligence./.

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