Disaster Crisis Communication Innovations: Lessons Learned From 2011 Floods in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Disaster crisis communication is essential for providing adequate and successful disaster management process during disaster events. This article analyses the disaster communication in Thailand during the 2011 floods. The newspapers and government agencies found it difficult to provide timely and accessible flood information to the public. The methodology involves qualitative analysis of the data collected by questionnaire survey, key informant interviews and print news headlines from three leading newspapers in Thailand. The article involves adoption of structuration theory for analyzing the severe implication and inadequate crisis communication in Thailand during 2011 floods. The findings include the gaps in the disaster communication systems at the government level towards the local community. There is a need to provide user friendly disaster communication system to assist in resilient communities. All channels of communication including television and media, smartphones, open source data and social media must be incorporated in a comprehensive disaster communication system.

KEYWORDS

Crisis, Disaster Communication, Disaster Recovery, Floods, Information Dissemination, Resilience and Flood Management, Sustainable Development

INTRODUCTION

Thailand faced major floods in 2011, one of the greatest in recent decades. With such a catastrophic event, the government and community struggled for accurate and timely communication between themselves. Disaster crisis communication deals with communicating the accurate and timely information through proper channels to the communities (Fearn-Banks, 2011). Considered to be fourth costliest natural disaster after 2011 Japan Tsunami, Kobe earthquake in 1995 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the 2011 floods disaster called for effective communication between various stakeholders involved such as government, media channels, international organizations and communities. The Thai government lacked in providing adequate information to various stakeholders including the local communities (Pathak & Ahmad, 2018).

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The inadequate disaster communication system enhances the vulnerabilities and social and economic challenges among the vulnerable population (Manoj & Baker, 2007). The untimely and inadequate flood warning results in enhanced losses, damages and social trauma among affected communities. Thailand, being equipped with technical knowhow and with its 95% of population equipped with access to mobile networks, web-based emails, television, radio broadcasts and other communication channels during floods, could provide for faster and effective dissemination of actual flood warning to ensure reduced damages and losses among populations during disasters.

Crisis is difficult to be defined so there is a lack of accepted definition (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). However, crisis could be divided into intentional and unintentional in accordance its occurrence being natural or man-made (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2011). Disaster crisis communication may be understood as the dissemination of disaster risk information and situation of the disaster information on a real-time basis with all the actors involved in the disaster. This communication must be user-friendly, easy to understand and adapt to reduce disaster losses and enhance resiliency among communities.

The disaster crisis communication could be divided into pre-disaster, during disaster and post disaster periods. During all these phases of disaster, communication must be maintained to enhance resilience among the communities. The conflicting disaster information in the pre-disaster phase would result in increased damages. However, they bring about innovative disaster communication strategies and initiates road to smooth recovery and mitigation from the disaster event (Tadonki, 2012).

The Thai government was unable to tap these available channels of communication during the 2011 floods resulting in misinformed local level government as well as the vulnerable communities (Pathak & Ahmad, 2018). This provided for communities to evolve and initiate grassroots crisis communication to cope better with the 2011 floods (Wang, 2013). The people came up with ideas and innovation for better disaster crisis communication such as Dr. Seree’s flood situation program telecasted on PBSTV channel, ThaiFlood.com, the animated videos from Roo Su and flood information available through various apps in mobile phones.

2011 THAILAND FLOODS

The 2011 Thailand floods were one of the costliest disasters in the history of Thailand. Several natural as well as human induced factors contributed towards the enhanced impacts of 2011 floods. It was estimated the total economic damage from 2011 floods was over 46 billion USD and social impacts extended to several north and all of the central provinces in Thailand (World Bank, 2012). The industrial sector was among the hardest hit with implications towards global losses due disruption in the supply chain management.

The major impacts of 2011 Thailand floods were borne by almost every sector of the economy including public and private sectors. The losses were felt all over the globe with Small and medium Enterprises inundated and disruptive supply chain management. For example, the shortages of Hard Disks in USA due to 2011 Thailand Floods. Likewise, the large-scale enterprises lost millions of dollars due to inundation of warehouses and company premises. For example, the inundation of the car manufacturing companies such as Honda in Ayutthaya province which led to submergence of several new cars at the showroom and warehouse leading to gigantic economic losses to the company.

Apart from the economic damages and losses, the social impacts were felt throughout the Thailand. The mental pressure, trauma, exposure to natural environment including snakes, dogs, monitor lizards moving freely in flood waters led to a serious threat to the local communities. A crocodile farm was completely inundated leading to all crocodiles swimming out of their containments. This led to mass outrage and sense of uncertainty among the flood inundated provinces in Thailand.

The Chao Phraya river basin was flood inducing water body and inundated on an average height of 2 meters in most of the flooded regions (refer to Figure 1). Few low-lying regions reported with over 3 meters of flood water level inundating almost everything on the ground and 1st floor levels. The miscommunication or no communication among the vulnerable communities led to higher
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