

Government Crisis Communications and Business Crisis Response during 2024 Dubai Floods

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Abstract

The paper analyzes the behavior of business entities based in the Emirate of Dubai in the context of crisis communication responses by government institutions during the Dubai 2024 floods. The research aims to identify if there are key differentiating factors that influence the understanding of government crisis communications by businesses. Numerous literature sources indicate the importance of employee wellbeing policies for reducing crisis risks and hazards. A document analysis of public announcements of Dubai Government institutions, as well as responses, announcements, and policies of 69 companies operating in Dubai, has been performed to understand what and how the government communicated during the crisis, how companies behaved during the crisis, and what policies and procedures are in place in the companies. The crisis communication of the Dubai government and official authorities was proactive and in line with principles defined by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory. This resulted in the successful mitigation of the crisis risks and the timely restoration of the basic functioning of the city's critical infrastructure. At the same time, the crisis response of business entities was not univocal: some businesses decided to work remotely or temporarily cease their operations, while others decided to carry on with the "business as usual" approach, returning the employees to their workplaces quickly and putting them at risk. Findings of the research indicate that companies with a clear focus on employee wellbeing and developed health, safety, and environment policies were less involved in putting their employees at risk than companies that did not highlight employee wellbeing as one of their priorities. Further, the findings highlight the importance of employee wellbeing policies in crisis risk mitigation and contribute to the body of knowledge in terms of crisis communication, employee wellbeing, and emergency management.

Keywords: Crisis communication; business communication; crisis management; risk mitigation; emergency management

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1. Introduction

In April 2024, the United Arab Emirates, and especially the Emirate of Dubai was struck by massive floods, following the most intense rainfall in the last 75 years. The city of Dubai is renowned for its arid climate and limited rainfall, with an average of 100 mm of precipitation annually. However, the city received a record-breaking quantity of rain in just 24 hours, surpassing the average annual rainfall in a single day. The highest rainfall in the UAE was recorded in the "Khatm Al Shakla" area in the neighboring city of Al Ain, where 254 millimeters of rain fell during the storm (Chamberlain, 2024; Hatem, 2024; Pedler & Jewers, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

Such extreme weather adversity caused major disruptions throughout the city, flooding roads, homes, and businesses. The city's infrastructure struggled to cope with the amount of water, leading to the closure of numerous major roads and highways (Reuters, 2024). Public transportation services were also significantly affected, as numerous bus routes were flooded.

Moreover, Dubai Metro was experiencing delays and cancellations due to flooded tracks. Dubai International Airport reported numerous flight delays and cancellations, leaving passengers stranded (Neild et al., 2024; Turak, 2024). Residents in certain areas of Dubai were significantly affected, with many having to evacuate their homes due to rising floodwater. Emergency services worked continuously to rescue residents who got trapped in the flooded areas. Temporary shelters were provided to those whose homes were flooded (Reuters, 2024).

The economic impact of the floods was significant, not only in terms of the cost of the infrastructure restoration but also in the context of businesses. Commercial districts experienced severe disturbances: retail centers and warehouses were flooded, resulting in lost merchandise and interrupted operations. The businesses are affected significantly, with many small companies struggling to recover from the loss of inventory and revenue (Cabral & Kamel, 2024). The exact total cost of the damage caused by floods is yet to be estimated, but it is known that natural disasters of such scale cause significant losses in terms of physical and material damage (Grassmuck, 2015).

Extreme weather conditions and their impact on the functioning of the city required a comprehensive crisis and emergency response from the Government of Dubai and official stakeholders, such as the National Centre of Meteorology, Civil Defense, Dubai Police, and others. Despite the strong and unified crisis response of the Government and official authorities, businesses did not have a coherent response to the crisis: while some businesses decided to continue working remotely until the functioning of the city was fully restored, some others decided to carry on with “business as usual” approach, following proactive communication and positive messages sent by the officials. Going back to the “business as usual” approach too early resulted in putting the employees at additional risks and material losses, due to the massive impact of the floods on the city’s physical infrastructure. Based on the document analysis of Dubai Government crisis responses and policy documents of companies operating in the Emirate of Dubai, the research aims to identify if there are key differentiating factors that influence the understanding of government crisis communications by businesses. The findings of such research can help both governments and businesses to mitigate crisis risks effectively and navigate their communication in cases of extreme emergencies.

2. Problem Statement

In the nowadays world of immediate flow of information, proper crisis and emergency management are critical for maintaining the positive reputation of organizations. Inadequate crisis response might result in strong value incongruence between an organization and its public and lead to further induction of moral outrage, adversely affecting organizational reputation (Coombs & Tachkova, 2023). Thus, appropriate crisis response and mitigation of crisis risks are critically important elements for successful organizational strategic communications and reputation management.

In the reputation management context, the history of past crises intensifies the attribution of a current crisis and exposes organizational reputation to a higher level of risk. The study of Coombs (2004) showed a positive correlation between reputational threat and attribution of responsibility: the more stakeholders attribute responsibility for a crisis, the higher the reputational threat is for an organization. According to Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007), natural disasters, as a narrow scope of possible organizational crises, are classified into victim crisis cluster (Coombs, 2007; Selaković, 2021). Even though an organization bears minimum responsibility for the occurrence of a crisis, stakeholders consider

an organization responsible for actions that need to diminish the consequences of the natural disaster and restore normal functioning. If crisis communication is not handled adequately, natural disasters can cause significant negative reputational impact (Grassmuck, 2015). This is especially noticeable in cases of floods, earthquakes, and other types of natural disasters that come without any direct involvement of the stakeholders. An additional negative reputational impact can be created by fake news spreading during the crises caused by natural disasters (Mărcău et al., 2023; Méndez-Muros et al., 2024), and organizations are more prone to such impacts if there is a prior history of crises (Yuan et al., 2021).

In terms of strategic crisis communication, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Hereinafter: SCCT) is successfully used to anticipate appropriate responses to the complex and challenging crises caused by natural disasters, with a broad scope of application through both mainstream and digital media (Coombs et al., 2020; Edwards, 2011; Liu et al., 2018). SCCT offers a systematic approach to responding to crises in order to protect the organization's reputation. The government or its entity can face irreparable reputational damage from the inappropriate handling of a crisis caused by a storm (Grassmuck, 2015). More importantly, citizens and businesses could face various types of physical, economic and emotional damages, and reputational risks increase if they were not aware of potential danger before the crisis. This is an especially important aspect as an organization needs to ensure stakeholders that they are safe prior to rebuilding its reputation (Coombs, 2007).

Crises caused by natural disasters are usually in the cluster of anticipated events (McConnell & Drennan, 2006). Thus, crisis preparation, pre-planned crisis responses, and coordination between different entities relevant to the flow of the crisis are critical for the successful handling of the crisis (Lovari & Bowen, 2020; Selaković & Ljepava, 2023). The literature suggests that proper crisis preparation can mitigate the risks related to floods (Thieken et al., 2007; Kreibich et al., 2017). Further, proactive communication and setting up mass messaging and push notification systems help mitigate health and material risks and help prevent more severe consequences of natural disasters (Alsabhan & Dudin, 2023; Kreibich et al., 2017; Kuller et al., 2021).

The available body of literature offers numerous insights regarding crisis response and emergency management strategies in cases of natural disasters. Further, government emergency and crisis responses are investigated thoroughly. However, it has not been examined to the full extent how businesses align their internal communications with official government communications during the crises caused by natural disasters. Quarshie & Leuschner (2020), as well as Wang et al. (2022), investigated inter-organizational interaction during major disaster events and pointed out the importance of proper coordination and understanding for enhancement of the systemic resilience. However, it is not fully clear how businesses perceive government messages during natural disasters and how they convert them to internal communications related to employee wellbeing. Moreover, available literature sources do not indicate whether companies and businesses are keen to put their employees at risk intentionally during this type of crisis in order to ensure continuity of the operations. This is especially important in the context of Klibi et al. (2013) considerations that one of the main challenges during natural disasters is the provision of sufficient quantities of appropriate emergency resources exactly when and where they are needed. Research by Marshall (2020) indicates that building a safety culture is associated with disaster risk reduction. Zhang et al. (2020) identified safety culture as a distinctive factor for accidents in coal mining plants. However, the literature sources do not offer insights on whether business entities with clearly defined health and safety policies react differently during natural disasters than businesses without such policies.

3. Research Questions

With the identified research gaps related to business understanding of government messages during the crisis and business behavior during natural disasters, the key aim of the research is to identify if there are factors that influence the understanding of disaster-related government messages by businesses. The research further aims to understand the impact of safety culture on the internal communications of businesses during natural disasters. The case of the 2024 Dubai floods has been used to identify government messaging and business behaviors related to the crisis caused by natural disasters.

The main research questions include the following:

RQ1: How did the Dubai Government and governmental entities communicate with the public during the crisis caused by the 2024 Dubai floods?

RQ2: How did business entities based in Dubai interpret messages of the governmental entities related to post-disaster normalization?

RQ3: Did the businesses with high safety culture communicate internally during the crisis differently than the ones without clear health and safety policies?

A systematic review of media outlets and social media platforms was employed to investigate communications of the Dubai Government and governmental entities during the crisis. List of media outlets and social media platforms included the media officially registered in the UAE, as well as global media available in English language. After the identification of the sources, a comprehensive set of keywords related to the floods has been identified. The set included the following keywords:

"Dubai floods",
"floods" and "safety",
"floods" and "impact",
"floods" and "business",
"floods" and "work",
"floods" and "road",
"floods" and "action",
"floods" and "press release",
"floods" and "press conference".

The keywords were utilized to search and identify available documents across the government websites, media outlets, digital news repositories, social media channels, and academic sources, using keywords described above. Only results in English were included.

The review was conducted in three phases:

1. The first phase involved gathering data from government sources and established media outlets to narrow down relevant announcements. Content was further evaluated for its relevance based on the presence of keywords.
2. The second phase focused on analyzing social media platforms to understand on how further dissemination of the messages was going on. This involved monitoring hashtags

and trends and leveraging social listening tools to identify conversations and mentions that linked government communications with the floods.

3. The third phase encompassed reviewing digital news repositories and social media to understand if any fake news related to government communications occurs. Identified relevant content was then systematically reviewed and analyzed to understand the overall communication framework of the Dubai Government and its institutions and analyze if it could be contextualized within the crisis response strategies suggested by SCCT and literature sources.

In the next stage of the research, a document analysis of websites, social media channels, and publicly available documents of companies operating in Dubai has been performed. The search was twofold, including the following:

1. Communications of the companies regarding the normalization of operations and return of the employees to work after the floods have been analyzed. The set of keywords included the terms “floods”, “return to work”, “normal working hours”, and “work remotely”. In total, 69 examples of communications matching the keywords have been identified, out of which 30 were international companies and 39 were local companies.
2. Consequently, websites and policy documents available in the public domain have been scrutinized to identify if companies identified within the document analysis have employee wellbeing policies, and health and safety policies. A total of 42 companies (28 international and 14 local) has been identified. However, transparently communicated policies could not be identified in the available public sources for 2 international and 25 local companies. Findings were compared with identified communications to understand organizational action in the context of government communication related to the normalization of life after floods in Dubai.

4. Findings

Crisis communication of the Dubai Government during the crisis was proactive and positive, providing assurance and confidence to the stakeholders despite the obvious severity of the natural disaster. Dubai Government and institutions under its umbrella opted for press releases as prevalent mode of communication. Total 24 communications of Government and its entities have been identified in the available documents. Both mainstream media and mobile warning systems spread information about the upcoming heavy rain before the emergence of the crisis, providing instructions for the citizens. The decision-making chain also worked efficiently, quickly, and proactively, basing its decisions on meteorological reports and announcing remote work in advance. Such a proactive stance, accompanied by prompt responses and timely communication, enabled the successful mitigation of the crisis risks in terms of human and material damage. In direct response to the severe crisis, Dubai used state-of-the-art technologies and transformed a possible catastrophic chain of events into a powerful demonstration of resilience and proper crisis preparedness. Dubai Government set up a crisis management team to coordinate the response to the floods, consisting of representatives from various government departments and agencies. The team worked around the clock to assess the damage, coordinate rescue efforts, and implement measures to mitigate the impact of the floods.

In comparison with the available literature findings of good practices related to flood crisis management and flood crisis communication, it is obvious that Dubai successfully deployed

the positive mechanisms included in operational frameworks for flood risk and flood crisis communications, as described by Intrieri et al. (2020) and Kuller et al. (2021).

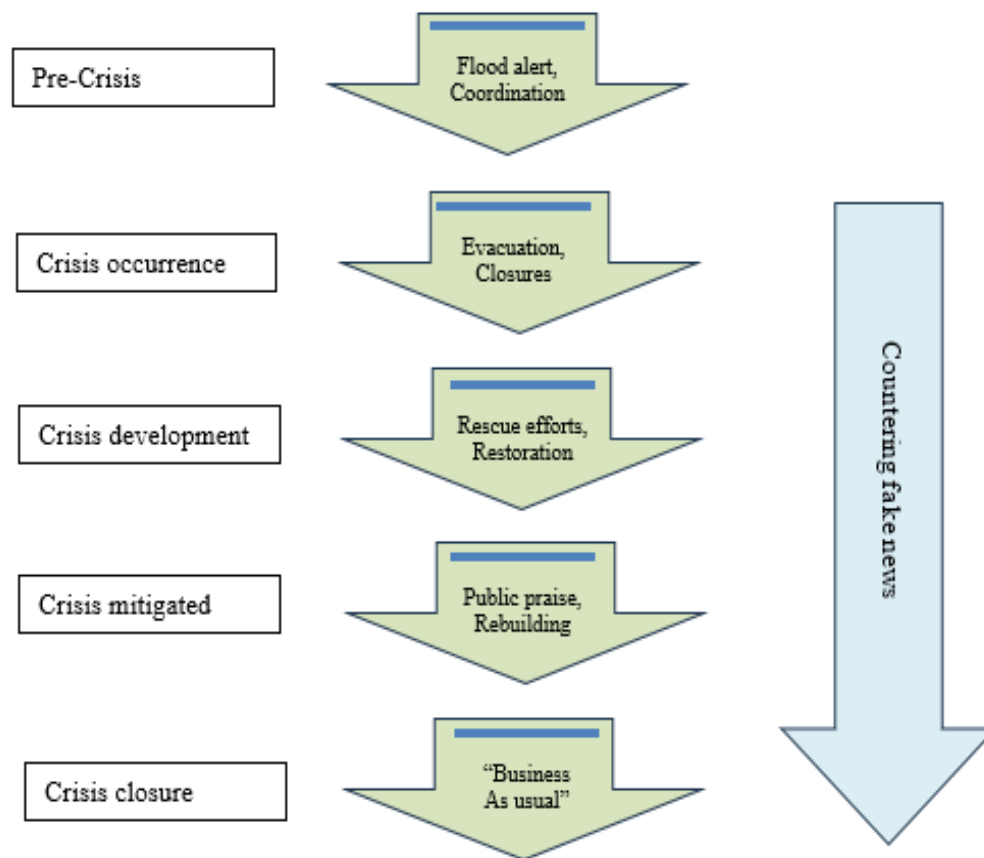
From the institutional perspective, the Dubai Government demonstrated a multi-faceted approach to crisis management and communication. The approach, identified from the available documents, included timely flood risk warning in line with Kuller et al. (2021) suggestions, prompt emergency response, and effective crisis response in line with Sellnow & Seeger (2021) theoretical considerations of crisis communication. These actions were followed by rebuilding action and proactive communication in line with the SCCT rebuilding stance (Coombs, 2007), aimed to mitigate the risk from the attribution of responsibility for the crisis. In terms of mitigation of possible reputational risks caused by fake news (Selaković, 2022), Dubai Government was taking prompt and strong refute stance: an example of refuting cloudseeding (Muwahed, 2024) is especially noticeable.

Immediate crisis response actions were coordinated by a specialized emergency and crisis management team that ensured a unified response across various departments. Its work included timely deployment of emergency services, managing evacuations where necessary, and timely coordination of the recovery efforts. In terms of crisis communication, regular and proactive updates were disseminated to the mainstream media, news websites, and digital media via the Dubai Media Office. Such an approach ensures keeping the residents and other stakeholders updated about safety measures, road closures, and recovery progress (Deen, 2024). The case of the Dubai floods confirmed the findings of Holland et al. (2021) regarding the importance of transparency in crisis communication for positive reputational outcomes in the case of Dubai floods (Holland et al., 2021). The government also encouraged sharing examples of humanity and bravery during the acute crisis in the digital space: notable examples are rescuing a kitten (Pedler & Jewers, 2024) and praising the rescue efforts (Dhal, 2024).

Rebuilding actions included infrastructure resilience plans – assessments and enhancements to infrastructure that were initiated immediately after an acute crisis and communicated to the publics. The key message conveyed is that efforts are made to withstand future incidents. Within the rebuilding communication efforts, the government announced a series of measures to help those affected recover from the disaster. Financial assistance was provided to residents whose homes were damaged, and businesses were offered support to rebuild and reopen. The government also announced plans to invest in upgrading the physical infrastructure and building a comprehensive sewerage system to better handle extreme weather events in the future (Bell & Narayanan, 2024; Hazem, 2024; Wakil, 2024).

The government also effectively refuted fake news spread in digital and some mainstream media that the UAE holds responsibility for the floods due to cloudseeding operations (Muwahed, 2024). The refute effort was firm and timely, without leaving any room for further interpretations and ambiguities.

The crisis response flow and highlight of the messaging are shown in **Graph 1**.

Graph 1. Flow of the crisis and key messaging throughout Dubai floods

Source: Author's own work.

Overall, the communication response of the Dubai Government to the crisis was swift and comprehensive. The government's effective, timely, and transparent communication with its citizens, coordination of emergency services, and immediate rebuilding action demonstrated a commitment to the safety and well-being of its residents.

However, businesses did not interpret the messages of Dubai government entities coherently. Proactive communication of quick recovery efforts resulted in the interpretation of "business as usual" by some businesses, especially those that do not have clearly defined well-being, health, and safety policies. Out of 42 companies (28 international and 14 local) that have transparently published policies, only 30.9% of them – 7 international and 6 local – put the employees at risk by inviting them to come back to the offices. At the same time, out of 27 companies without transparent well-being, health, and safety policies, 62.96% of them (1 international and 16 local) decided to call the employees back to work prior to full restoration. Moreover, aggregated data indicate a statistically significant difference between multinational and local companies – 26.67% of multinational companies called employees back to work, while 54.41% of local companies did the same. Thus, the findings of the document analysis indicate that emphasis needs to be put on clear communication of the Government towards businesses. Simultaneously, raising awareness of local companies regarding the importance of employee well-being in the occasions of natural disasters should also be considered an important pillar of future efforts.

5. Conclusions

The response of the Dubai Government was commendable, with timely and efficient communication and coordination, in line with the best practices described in the Situational Crisis Communication Theory. Significant reputational risks were successfully mitigated, while the spread and possible negative impact of fake news has also been prevented. The limitation of the research is that only English language sources have been investigated. The floods also underscore the importance of addressing climate change at a global level. In future research, an example of effective crisis communication during the 2024 Dubai floods can be used as a model for comparative studies of natural disaster communication in other regions and countries. Moreover, a comprehensive study, including the sources in both English and Arabic, could be deployed to confirm the initial findings of this study.

Incoherent responses of businesses in the phase of post-crisis normalization highlight the importance of tight inter-organizational coordination in future disaster management. Crisis communication from the government to the businesses should include firmer and clearer dissemination of the decisions related to employee wellbeing, to avoid room for interpretation and putting residents at unnecessary risk. In the future, quantitative studies could be deployed to investigate the level of understanding and depth of penetration of messages communicated by the government to businesses during the crisis.

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