

Local over Digital?

An Empirical Analysis of Crisis Communication Strategies in the Bargi-Suviana Explosion

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This study examines the crisis communication strategies employed during the Bargi-Suviana hydroelectric plant explosion in April 2024, aiming to explore the interplay between digital communication tools, organizational strategies, and the broader context of a multistakeholder crisis. Combining media content analysis of digital outputs and in-depth interviews with key informants, the research investigates the self-produced crisis communication of four key stakeholders – Enel, the Civil Protection Department, the Emilia-Romagna Region, and the National Fire Brigade – focusing on the integration of social media practices into broader crisis management plans. Findings reveal that communication strategies were shaped by both the nature of the crisis and the different roles and competencies of the involved organizations. The study further uncovers a range of *deliberate* and *emergent* communication strategies, highlighting the challenges of balancing digital and localized responses to address the humanitarian and environmental dimensions of the crisis.

Keywords: crisis communication; crisis management; environmental crisis; multistakeholder communication; digital crisis coverage; social research.

Introduction

The long research history on crisis management has consistently emphasized the crucial role of communication as an essential component in addressing the challenges posed by critical events (Coombs, 1999; 2009; Mitroff, 2001), which lies in its potential to «co-create frameworks for understanding and action within the highly uncertain, demanding, and threatening context of a crisis» (Sellnow, Seeger, 2013, p. 11).

The key role of crisis communication is particularly evident in multidimensional and multistakeholder crises (Ham *et al.*, 2012), especially environmental disasters «which adversely affect the natural and human resources» (Simon *et al.*, 2015, p. 610), where it emerges as a crucial tool to optimize the coordination efforts among a diverse array of actors, each with

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its own communication goals and challenges (Coombs, 2007; Ulmer *et al.*, 2019).

Over the last decade, alongside the lasting relevance of crisis communication via legacy media, the pivotal role of self-produced communication, especially on social media, has become increasingly visible to support the organizational efforts in disaster times (Austin, Jin, 2017). The integration of social media strategies into broader crisis management plans has indeed emerged as vital tools for addressing both the critical requirements of citizens and communities affected by crises, and the pressing need for information by the general public, enhancing crisis awareness (Spalletta *et al.*, 2021), while also fostering a renewed communicative relationship with citizen-users (Comunello, 2014; Comunello, Mulargia, 2017; Lovari *et al.*, 2020),

This process has been further accelerated by the widespread changes driven by the Covid pandemic, which led both private and public sector's organizations to increasingly rely on disintermediated communication strategies (Sala, Scaglioni, 2020; Ducci, Lovari, 2021), to ensure the immediacy and accessibility of information through real-time sharing of content across multiple platforms and formats (Luoma-aho *et al.*, 2021).

Among the key challenges in this transformation is the need to manage the increasing complexity of digital media practices, while also addressing the ethical implications of their use in specific crisis contexts (Lovari, Bowen, 2020). At the same time, organizations are tasked with balancing the traditional functions performed by legacy media in times of crisis and the growing shift towards social media practices which aligns with the evolving organizational communication in the digital era (Ndlela, 2024).

What is more, the growing reliance on social media practices faces distinctive challenges in the specific context of multidimensional crises, notably environmental ones, where organizations must balance the urgency for real-time visibility with a focus on the territorial dimension, addressing the needs of affected publics, victims, and local communities (Covello, 2006; Hornmoen, Backholm, 2018). In such contexts, while social media accelerates communication, serving effectively as a relational strategy (Ulmer *et al.*, 2019), it can nonetheless undermine the ability to maintain a unified and consistent narrative (Jin *et al.*, 2014; Gribas *et al.*, 2018).

Building on this perspective, analyzing organizational self-produced communication of multidimensional crises is thus crucial for understanding how traditional strategies integrate with social-mediated ones, aligning with the nature of the crisis and the organizations' level of involvement or perceived responsibility (Coombs, 1995). This analysis also sheds light on

whether the use of digital communication reflects a *deliberate* strategy – planned to align with predefined objectives – or an *emergent* one, evolving organically in response to the crisis’ dynamics that arise during its management (Mintzberg, 2007).

1. Aims & Methodology

Based on these premises, this study examines a major industrial crisis with huge environmental and social impacts: the accident at the Bargi hydroelectric plant, located on Lake Suviana in the Emilia-Romagna Region, on April 9, 2024. This accident was caused by an explosion during a testing phase following extraordinary maintenance work, and led to the deaths of seven workers and injuries to five others. Recovery operations underscored the complexity of managing a multidimensional crisis which involved addressing: *technical challenges*, related to the causes of the explosion; *humanitarian concerns*, including victim rescue and recovery; and *environmental impacts*, related to the contamination of Lake Suviana and the subsequent efforts to treat and restore its waters.

The decision to focus on this crisis event depends on its being a paradigmatic case study for investigating the interplay between digital communication tools, organizational strategies, and the broader context of a multi-stakeholder crisis, which demanded a coordinated response from four key actors: Enel Group (and the related plant managing company Enel Green Power), the Italian Civil Protection Department, the Emilia-Romagna Region, and the National Fire Brigade.

Understanding how these stakeholders managed their communication efforts, both individually and in coordination with one another, is crucial to gaining insight into the strategies adopted and their implications in a crisis scenario. To this end, the research addresses the following research questions: *RQ1*) How did the involved stakeholders structure their digital communication?; *RQ2*) How did social posting integrate with their broader crisis communication strategies, both from individual and collective efforts?; *RQ3*) Was the social coverage part of a *deliberate* strategy, or did it occur as an *emergent* response?

From a methodological point of view, the study is structured in two complementary phases, combining different qualitative research methods. The first phase consists of a media content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Altheide, Schneider, 2013) of the self-produced digital communication of the above mentioned four stakeholders, examining both institutional web-

sites, through a targeted keyword search of all crisis-related content, and social media crisis coverage over a four-month period¹. The second one consists of in-depth interviews with key informants (Bichi, 2007; Corbetta, 2015) addressed to communication managers from the involved organizations: the head of the press office for the Civil Protection Department, the director of the Information and Communication agency for the Emilia-Romagna Region, and the head of Emergency Communication for the National Fire Brigade. As for Enel, a formal interview could not be carried out due to the company's policy of withholding official statements during the ongoing investigation. However, an informal exchange enabled source verification through the relevant divisions within Enel Group's External Relations Department.

2. Digital crisis coverage: a comparative analysis

To address the first research question, the media content analysis revealed distinct approaches shaped by stakeholders' institutional roles and responsibilities.

Moving from the two main crisis actors – Enel Group (EG) and Enel Green Power (EGP) – the analysis revealed a communication approach both parallel and complementary across their respective websites, mainly structured around 3 key press releases which framed the crisis within an ongoing narrative, avoiding explicit mention of the explosion and its main causes. On April 10, a press release from EG expressed condolences to the victims and their families while acknowledging the efforts of first responders. On the same day, through a bilingual press release EGP announced the establishment of a €2 million fund to support affected families, in addition to on-site logistical and psychological assistance. On April 11, EG's second press release informed about an internal fundraising initiative allowing employees to donate work hours to support affected colleagues. Social media activity focused on a limited set of channels, using circular and redundant information to reinforce key institutional messages, but only limited to the acute phase of the crisis (from April 9 to 12). It took place primarily on X² (14 posts in total), with EGP taking the lead (11 posts). The X coverage

¹ This period ranges from 9 April (the date of the explosion) to 9 August 2024, encompassing the crisis recovery period marked by the restoration of water flow from the Bargi hydroelectric plant to the Suviana basin.

² No crisis mention was found on Facebook and YouTube, while a limited engagement was recorded on Instagram and LinkedIn (2 posts each).

consists of a few original posts and some follow-up ones (posted as an answer to the first statements) providing some limited additional crisis details. Images with dark backgrounds were used to convey messages of condolence and solidarity, while blue backgrounds highlighted support initiatives³.

The Civil Protection Department's (CPD) limited digital coverage seems to reflect its supervisory role rather than direct operational involvement. Its social media activity consists of only 2 Facebook and X posts, both published during the starting phase of the crisis (April 10 and 11), announcing the deployment of a dedicated team and highlighting the complexity of the rescue efforts. No updates appeared on its YouTube channel⁴, and the official website lacked crisis-related content, except for a press release published six months later announcing the renewal of a protocol with Enel for crisis prevention and management. While this agreement suggests post-emergency follow-up, it makes no reference to Bargi's explosion.

The digital coverage of the Emilia-Romagna Region (ER) was characterized by limited but strategically planned communication, reflecting its evolving role across different phases of the crisis. Early statements were issued through two press releases (April 10-11), featuring reports from Governor Stefano Bonaccini – emphasizing empathy, solidarity, and a commitment to uncovering the causes of the incident – and the Vice President Irene Priolo, responsible for regional civil protection, highlighting logistical assistance and psychological support for victims' families. Similarly, early social coverage on Facebook and X primarily consists of a repost of public leaders' messages, from head of State to regional Governor. ER resumed its digital communication months later, providing updates on recovery efforts on the environmental aspects of the crisis, including water purification and restoration projects at the plant. These updates – consisting of both news (June 13) and a press release (August 9) on the website and dedicated posts on Facebook (2) and X (4) – shifted the narrative toward public-interest issues, using detailed descriptions, visual materials, and a structured timeline to ensure transparency and facilitate technical translation for public understanding.

The National Fire Brigade (NFB) stands out for its extensive and dynamic digital coverage, balancing real-time updates and visual storytelling. The official website hosted two detailed news updates: the first summariz-

³ This visual approach was consistent across platforms, with EG posting in Italian and EGP in English on Instagram, and only EG publishing on LinkedIn.

⁴ Notably, the CPD's YouTube channel, typically used for live-streaming press conferences of critical events, featured no videos on the crisis.

ing rescue operations (April 12), and the second (April 18) highlighting institutional recognition of the NFB's efforts. Besides, the dedicated platform *Vigili del Fuoco TV* provided 3 extensive entries with updated information about the crisis development, detailing rescue efforts and technical operations, and allowing all multimedia content to be downloaded. This extensive communication, supplemented by social media posts on Instagram – featuring 5 extensive updates from April 9 to 11 – and a 2 hour YouTube video showing the ongoing rescue operations (April 10), provided behind-the-scenes insights, simplifying complex operational details for public understanding, while also serving as a motivational tool within the organization.

3. Between deliberate and emergent practices: a local crisis storytelling

In-depth interviews with key informants enabled to answer the subsequent research questions, providing an in-depth focus on the overall communication strategies of the involved stakeholders in the different phases of the crisis, while also highlighting the *deliberate* or *emergent* nature of their social coverage.

3.1. Different levels of multi-stakeholder communication

A recurring element mentioned by all interviewees concerns their planned communication practices, characterized by different levels of stakeholders' coordination.

EG⁵ points out how its crisis communication management combines monitoring and prevention – supported by a dedicated real-time communication structure – with a more proactive approach led by the Press Office. During critical events, these functions collaborate with the company's institutional relations team and all relevant involved actors. This multi-stakeholder coordination was confirmed during the plant accident, notably the effective (and pre-established) cooperation with the CPD, which facilitated a joint communication strategy while respecting their own roles and responsibilities in managing the crisis.

⁵ Due to the inability to conduct a formal interview with Enel, exact statements from the informal discussion are not quoted, nor are specific sources attributed. Instead, the key information has been rephrased and contextualized within the discussion of the main findings in a more neutral manner.

For its part, the CPD attributes this cooperative approach to the implementation of its own crisis communication «model», which enables national coordination among multiple stakeholders based on established «rules of engagement». To handle the high volume of press requests during emergencies, the CPD typically sets up a press room – either at its headquarters or directly at the crisis site – «to facilitate the storytelling of the emergency and to involve all the actors concerned». Additionally, on-site interviews are preferred over TV appearances to optimize the critical time required for emergency management and to align with operational efforts: «sitting in a TV studio does not visually represent the intervention we are carrying out».

Multi-stakeholder cooperation is also a key element of the ER's crisis communication plans, a practice refined over the past five years during crises such as Covid-19 and regional floods, which led to «living the crisis times as ordinary ones». It relies on two main strategies: immediate coordination between political and administrative leaders and other involved organizations and coordinated efforts between communication teams.

In contrast to the *external* cooperative efforts highlighted by other actors, the NFB shifts the focus to the critical role of *internal* coordination in its crisis communication, ensuring that relevant information is verified directly in the field by local teams. Often being «the only ones with the right information», the NFB prioritizes establishing itself as «the official source of information on the crisis, to prevent misinformation and provide technical explanations of rescue operations». From its point of view, the independence for external sources addresses both the high expectations of crisis audiences and the understanding that «the way the situation is communicated can influence the course of the relief effort».

3.2. Facing the crisis: on-site communication and digital challenges

Shifting from pre-crisis plans to actual crisis communication, the CPD highlighted how its established on-site coordination model «marked a before and an after» in crisis communication: «after our arrival, periodic on-site press conferences were organized, bringing all involved actors to the same table, allowing journalists to ask about all aspects of the crisis». While social media was viewed as complementary to this model, during the Bargi's crisis, its limited use reflected an *emergent* strategy, constrained by technical and time challenges: «if Suviana had lasted 10 days, we would have started live streaming. We needed technical preparation and better connectivity».

ER supported the DPC's joint on-site press briefings, viewing them as helpful «not to control information but to manage it», while also conveying «a sense of presence, seriousness, and rigor». At the same time, its diversified social media coverage reflected a *deliberate* strategy, resulting in a more silent role in the first phase of the crisis, due to its lower involvement, and a more active one in the recovery phase, «where regional competence was at stake», to showcase its responsibilities in addressing environmental issues.

EG's crisis communication strategy was centered on on-site joint communication as its primary approach to demonstrate transparency and availability. According to the company, this was further reinforced by the continuous on-site presence of EGP CEO Salvatore Bernabei, whose visible leadership was intended to address technical complexities and strengthen Enel's credibility. These efforts were complemented by targeted national media appearances aimed at reaching a broader audience and addressing critical informational needs. The deliberate strategy to limit social media use to essential service updates reflected a conscious decision to adopt a *tone of voice* appropriate to the emergency, also resulting in the suspension of all social media activities as a sign of mourning for deceased colleagues.

Although the constant on-site presence is a core aspect of the NFB's work, this actor followed a more independent communication strategy, aligned with its established practices and driven by the operational urgency of rescue efforts: «we share news as it happens, avoiding constraints of scheduled press briefings». In contrast, its extensive social media crisis coverage emerged as a *deliberate* strategy, motivated by the nature of their rescue operations and the need «to explain technically complex operations in a simple way, bringing people to the scene of the emergency through a narrative focused on the dominance of the image». Furthermore, in an era where there is «a war over narratives to secure newsworthiness», the NFB looks at visual social storytelling as an essential tool «to objectify information».

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study confirms the persistent challenges of managing multidimensional crises where the need for immediacy and real-time visibility, typical of digital communication strategies, must balance with the human concerns and contextual sensitivity of localized responses.

Indeed, while the pervasive use of digital media has established a recurrent pattern in organizational crisis behaviors, the Bargi-Suviana crisis highlights a counterbalance where the immediacy, tangibility, and credibility of on-site communication often overcomes the reach of digital platforms.

In line with the principles of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 1995), the overall crisis communication management reveals how the deployment of diversified local and digital strategies was shaped by both the nature of the critical event – and its dual humanitarian and environmental dimensions – and the different competences and responsibilities of the involved organizations.

During the acute phase, the humanitarian aspect led to a stronger focus on on-site communication for managing the urgent needs of rescue operations and supporting victims' families. This localized approach does not negate the role of social media but rather positions it as a complementary tool, dependent on the nature of the critical event and the specific organizational level of involvement.

Except for NFB, whose dual local-digital approach reflects both the inherent aspects of its work and established communication strategies, limited social coverage in this phase turns out to be an *emergent* choice for the Civil Protection Department – due to time and technological constraints – and a *deliberate* one for Emilia-Romagna Region and Enel Group, although for opposite reasons. On the one hand, the Region focused on supporting joint coordination efforts, emphasizing institutional presence, while its restrained digital presence reflects the non-operational role played at this stage of the crisis. On the other hand, despite its role of primary actor, Enel deliberately limited its social coverage, prioritizing respect for the victims and aligning with an accommodative approach (Cancel *et al.*, 1997).

In the recovery phase, as the environmental impacts of the crisis took center stage, the institutional competence of the Emilia-Romagna Region translated into the (once again) *deliberate* choice to adopt a first-hand digital communication, with the aim to address public concerns, integrating technical details with accessible narratives.

While this study primarily focused on the analysis of self-produced crisis communication, future research intends to shift and integrate audience perspectives, exploring how public reactions, sentiment, and discourse align with organizational strategies in time of crisis. A key aspect of this analysis will be the role of trust indicators, assessing how different communication strategies influence perceived credibility and organizational trust among the public. This subsequent phase will adopt a complementary

analytical perspective, with the aim to refine crisis communication frameworks and enhance their applicability in future multidimensional and multi-stakeholder crisis contexts.

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