The impact of the media on citizens' attitudes and behaviours

The ability of the media to influence the thoughts, attitudes and behaviours of citizens is a given. Whether we think about the determination of how events, actions or problems are represented in the public space – framing, or the prioritization of some issues instead of others – agenda-setting (Nelson et al. 567-583), it is a fact that nowadays the media have an important saying on the perception of the World by the people. Some authors characterize the role of the media as being a virtuous and constructive one for bringing citizens closer to each other by enabling the sharing of information on both good and bad things, the dissemination of knowledge and the participation in joint initiatives (Conti, Memoli, 27-46). Nevertheless, other authors like Cappella and Jamieson contend that media can also play a role that is more "vicious" (Cappella, Jamieson 336) for they encourage social tensions along with disillusionment, suspicion and distrust towards the elites and the states institutions responsible for acting in times of crisis (Robinson 409-432). From both optimistic and pessimistic perspectives, media appear relevant actors in the process of formation of citizens' attitudes. Thus, by scanning the existing literature on the role of the media and its impact on citizens in crisis situations, a series of conclusions spring up: Whereas social media's role is definitely increasing both in times of calm and crisis, traditional media remains a trusted and authoritative source of information, making their mix ideally for the communication of strategic messages to the citizens. The media have played an important role in educating people on matters of public interest in general and on crisis, and risks in particular. Moreover, they can make significant contributions to information flows during and after cascading crises and disasters, yet, many times, myths perpetuated through media channels may also hinder response and recovery initiatives through their distortion of the behaviour and needs have affected populations. Emotional discourses in disaster media coverage can help raise aid donations and invite members of the public to care about 'distant suffering'. However, critics argue that this focus on 'death and destruction' has disproportionate influence upon the allocation of resources, and it is often appropriated by political elites to serve their respective agendas. Media have been promoting a model of 'shared responsibility', in which citizens are encouraged to play an active role in the production and sharing of crisis information, this being mainly seen within the last years via social media. The role of the news media has shifted from gatekeeping to gate watching, whereby they publicize and share relevant news content rather than focus solely on its production.

Note: See source document for full reference.

Applicable to:

Stakeholders: Communication

Disaster Phases: Prevention, Preparedness, Response, Recovery, All disaster phases

Types of Actors Concerned: Media

Hazards: Natural hazards, Man-made non-intentional hazards or emergency situations, Man-made intentional hazards

Recommendations:

- Inform citizens about the risk they may face and about possible actions and measures, they can take to reduce vulnerability and better prepare themselves

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- Use cultural factors to improve the effectiveness of disaster communication

Source

Deliverable D8.2 "Report on the role of the media in disaster risk communication" (page 51)

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