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# **Crisis Reporting in the Digital Age**

## **A Study of Swedish News Editors' Perceptions**

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### *Abstract*

Media communication is central for distributing information during and after crises. Media technology developments and rapidly changed media market conditions influence the conditions of crisis reporting in the digital age. As news media play a key role in crisis communication processes, it is interesting to increase knowledge about news editors' perceptions of crisis reporting in the digital media landscape. How do news editors tackle the publishing opportunities offered by new communication channels and the new demands from news consumers during crises? How important are online presence and instant information during crises? How important are the dialogue with the audience and the interactions with social media during crises? This paper intends to shed new light on why crisis reporting in the digital age is as it is by focusing on three aspects of digitalization: speed, live and user-generated content. The study is based on a survey with 30 Swedish news editors and publishers, representing public service radio and television, as well as daily national and local newspapers.

*Key words: digitalization, crisis reporting, news media, user-generated content*

## **Introduction**

Media communication is central for distributing information during and after crises. Media technology developments and rapidly changed media market conditions influence the conditions of crisis reporting in the digital age. Instant online publishing possibilities and live-TV coverage on news media websites affect newsroom work, and so do increased audience participation in the news process, through user generated content, chat functions and social media links. Speed and immediacy in reporting may be of great importance in a crisis situation, but an overload of information from different sources and difficulties to get information verified may also trigger rumours and unmotivated fear.

As news media play a key role in crisis communication processes, it is interesting to increase knowledge about news editors' perceptions of crisis reporting in the digital media landscape. How do news editors tackle the publishing opportunities offered by new communication channels and the new demands from news consumers during crises? How important are online presence and instant information during crises? How important are the dialogue with the audience and the interactions with social media during crises?

This paper intends to shed new light on why crisis reporting in the digital age is as it is. The study is based on structured interviews with 30 Swedish news editors and publishers, representing public service radio and television, as well as daily national and local newspapers. The results of the survey will be put in context of previous research in this field and are intended to contribute to the understanding of new challenges and risks of crisis reporting in digital news media.

### **Three aspects of digitalization**

Digitalization has fundamentally changed the underlining conditions for journalism as a practice to the extent that it has made traditional definitions blurry and requires new answers to the most fundamental of questions such as “What is Journalism?” (Franklin, 2013, p. 1). During the last decade an extensive amount of research has been produced exploring the changes in journalism caused by digitalization aiming to capture the rise of new journalistic trends and practices. Some would argue that the changes caused to the journalistic profession by digitalization are so profound that they are changing the very nature of journalism. Others suggest that social media, and in particular Twitter, is transforming journalism from a product to a service (Artwick, 2013; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007). The differences between journalism as a product and a service differ in so far as in the latter journalists are engaged in live tweeting news events and retweeting citizen voices whereas in the former they foremost link to their own news rely heavily on official sources despite the networked audience provided by Twitter.

In general, one of the main changes taken place in journalistic production during the last years is audience increasing participation in the news process (Enli and Ihlebæk, 2011; Krumsvik, 2013; Singer et al., 2011). According to Deuze (2005) there are especially two key concepts capturing the changing landscape of journalism, that is, control and transparency. According to the author, journalists run the risk of losing control over the news agenda in favor of other actors, which make use of journalistic practices. At the same time has transparency increased as it becomes easier for people inside as well as outside journalism to check, criticism and even intervene in the journalistic process. Barnard (2014) stresses how the changes to journalism brought about by the network era have created a hybrid networked journalistic “habitus that integrates values and practices from the traditional journalistic field with those from

digital and nonprofessional origins”. Even though scholars agree upon the trend towards more user generated material studies varies in regard to the extent and impact of such content. For example Karlsson (2011) demonstrates, based on a study of four major mainstream national news websites, that user participation are rapidly increasing but only in regard to processes which are peripheral to news journalism. That is, users have only to a limited extent started to perform professional journalistic tasks. According to Singer (2014) users mainly take on the role as secondary gatekeepers by assessing the value of the news content and to selectively re-disseminate selected parts of the content. Previous research has also documented that journalists react differently to audience involvement in news production. For example, a study based on US editors identifies four different journalistic positions, on theoretical and practical grounds, in regard to citizen journalism. One theoretical position was to reject the notion of citizen journalism based on the need for a clear distinction between professional journalists and citizens. On practical grounds, citizen journalism was rejected since citizen’s co-producing of news would require a lot of extra work on behalf of the journalists. The editors also approved of citizens journalism on theoretical grounds since they understood citizen journalism as one way of connecting with the community and to engage citizens. Finally, editors also approved for practical reasons where citizen journalism was perceived as a useful way for newspapers with small resources to get access to news material (Lewis et al, 2010).

If the studies above stress the changes caused to news practices by social media others argue that changes are in fact minimal. For example, a study on foreign news reporting in four Belgian newspapers between 1995–2010 shows that sourcing practices for foreign news showed no significant changes between the years studied, which according to the authors indicate that concerns about news room cost-cutting and influence on Web 2.0 are exaggerated (Van Leuven et al, 2013). Another study on seven major US media entities demonstrate that journalists

embrace Twitter as a source, however, at the same time they stick with their conventional routines by relying on Twitter accounts from official sources (Moon & Hadley, 2014). Also Parmelee (2013) underlines that even though political journalists used Twitter during the 2012 campaign to the extent that it altered daily reporting practices at the same time it did not cause a major shift in traditional journalistic norms, such as objectivity and gatekeeping. A comparative study of five countries (France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, and the United States) on journalist's use of Twitter demonstrate that meanwhile Twitter was used extensively its connective and technological features was seldom brought to its full potential (Engesser & Humprecht, 2014). Yet another comparative study on the use of social media (Finland, Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom) demonstrates that use and opinions on social media vary between countries and that the use is fragmented and influenced by "a myriad of different variables" (Gulyas, 2013).

Certain types of news events, such as election campaigns and risk and crisis situations, have received more scholarly interest than others in connection to social media use. One event which has received a lot of attention is the Arab Spring period which fueled the debate about the impact of social media for news coverage. For example, a content analysis comparing The New York Times, the Twitter feed of Times reporter Nick Kristof, and the citizen media site Global Voices, shows that the Times foremost quoted official sources and de-valuing protesters whereas Global Voices and Kristof's Twitter flows legitimized protesters and served as commentators/analysts, and even actors, in the unfolding events (Harlow & Johnson, 2011). On the other hand, a study on Belgian news media and the grass roots uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria in 2011 shows that journalists still valued traditional sourcing practices in Egypt and Tunisia whereas the Syrian coverage displayed higher amounts of network journalism practices (Van Leuven et al, 2013). From the perspective of risk information Mythen (2010) discusses the impact on citizen

journalism on risks information arguing that it is a way of providing plurality of risk discourses, introducing alternative news values and democratizing news flows. On the other hand, citizen journalism may also result in distortion, unequal access and populist forms of news presentation. Not only print journalism but also the use of images is under transformation.

In this research overview we will focus on three aspects of digitalization: speed, live and user-generated content. *Speed* has always played a key role in journalism as an intrinsic value of its own, often connected to the fear of being driven out of competition (Bantz et al, 1980; Gitlin, 1993:24). A classical conflict between different journalistic values is the one between speed and accuracy. The notion of speed has changed considerable in the light of the digitalization of journalism with its focus on *immediacy*. The notion of immediacy captures the observation that the news cycle has been considerable shortened from a one-day cycle to one of constant updating (Schlesinger and Doyle, 2015; Rosenberg and Feldman, 2008). The scholarly debate on speed and immediacy has foremost been related to how upheld journalistic standards related to accuracy with instant publishing of news (Avile's et al., 2004; Scott, 2005). This dilemma has also attracted considerable attention in connection to media coverage of various in crisis. For example Saltzis (2012) shows that updating of news stories are normally taking place during the first hours of the story, where some of these are made in a minute-by-minute basis driven by the competitive character of journalism where seconds matter. Even though stories are produced quickly corrections seldom appear neither does re-writing of stories.

According to Deuze the process towards immediacy process can result in two fundamentally different positions, either the news process becomes more open for news consumers engagement by the opportunities available for various types of interactive engagement or on the other hand immediacy prevents journalism for becoming more open to diversity in terms of included alternative sources. Hermida (2012) argues that digitalization creates new

processes of verification based on user's real-time engagement in examining and evaluates journalistic accounts. These new processes of verification would not have been possible without the introduction of social media with its potential to question the individualistic, top-down ideology of traditional journalism which for example becomes salient in connection to verification processes as opposed to the network distribution of expertise and authority, so called collective intelligence.

The notion of transparency is another interesting aspect discussed in the literature where for example Karlsson (2011) argues that the digitalization of the media environment contributes to higher levels of transparency in exposing previously hidden journalistic processes. It seems reasonable that practices of transparency are shifting depending on news outlet. In an ethnographic study on Norwegian journalists Steensen (2009) shows that online feature journalists are working in a more audience-driven and source-detached manner as compared to their print counterparts. Another interesting question is if national and local journalistic practices differ based on the digitalization of news. To date, there have been few studies on the impact of digitalization on local newspapers. In a project with community reporting in the UK local newspaper *Leicester Mercury* aimed at incorporating readers' citizens journalists took on a number of roles such as source, resource and collaborator. It was underlined that success was achieved through creating boundaries between "low level reporting carried out by community reporters and investigative journalism carried out by employed, trained staff" (Canter, 2013).

Similar to speed is *live* a corner stone in news reporting and especially so in connection to dramatic events as capture in for example the notion of media events or "disaster marathons'." In the wake of digitalization live reporting has gained increase importance. The increased use of live reporting is closely connected to a journalism driven by 'breaking news' and on-the-scene news. Scholars are critical of the extended use of live reporting arguing that the practice results in news

without content (Tuggle and Huffman, 2001). According to Lewis and Cushion (2009) are critical towards the nowadays routinized coverage of breaking news tend to be less well informed and independent as compared to conventional news items. The digital development has fueled the abilities for journalists to go live using various technological devices and developments. For example has so called 'live blogs' become popular components of news sites which are often used to cover serious breaking news. Even though there are updated constantly, which implies less time for fact checks, do research shows that readers still evaluate their objectivity positively due to compensation factors (Thurman, & Walters, 2013).

Another development in the history of live reporting has been the involvement of common people recording on the sites of unfolding events which in itself poses a challenge to the journalistic authority (Zelizer, 2007). According to an interview study with Swedish and Finnish journalists' the journalists argue that the use of citizen created photographs and videos have become routine in today's crisis reporting. Journalist's reactions to the increasing involvement of citizens vary and can be understood in basically three different ways; resistance, resignation and renewal (Andén-Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013).

### **The study**

In this paper we will explore how Swedish news editors understand their work in a digitalized news environment and what is happening with the notion of newsroom work during crises in a digitalized media climate. How do news editors tackle the publishing opportunities offered by new communication channels and the new demands from news consumers during crises? How important are online presence and instant information during crises? How important are the dialogue with the audience and the interactions with social media during crises? This paper

intends to shed new light on why crisis reporting in the digital age is as it is by focusing on three aspects of digitalization: speed, live and user-generated content.

With regard to methodology, a survey study among news editors from the 30 largest news department newsrooms in Sweden has been conducted. The survey covered both regular newsroom work procedures in the digital media environment and more specific routines and practices during crisis reporting. The survey included both closed and open questions. Representatives of the major news organizations answered the questionnaires at their working places, while the other ones were conducted on telephone. The fieldwork was done in Spring 2014. In the following section, the news editors' perceptions of the importance of speed, live and user-generated content during crises are reviewed.

## **Results**

### *Speed*

Speed is critical for newsrooms today, everyone interviewed in this study agree. They note that instant publishing has become the norm in general, as the technical progression has enabled swift publishing on various platforms. The channels are accessible to the broad public, who now expect and demand speed. This is particularly apparent during crisis situations. If the public don't find the information they want or need on one particular news site, they go elsewhere. This intensifies the importance of continuous updates. Instead of distributing a finished story, the standard now is that newsrooms piece information together and publish in a sequence of updates. Although the competitive aspect intensifies the speed during a crisis or dramatic event, verification and source criticism cannot be compromised at the expense of truth, an editor at a medium-sized daily says:

Our intent is to publish updates as fast as possible in all of our digital channels, at the rate that we can confirm the information. Parallel to that, we work hard on double-checking the facts, especially when it comes to sensitive material.

Providing correct information to people in a serious situation is imperative, as the wrong information can cause devastating consequences. Due to social media, traditional media has a new role today. In a crisis, fear and false information can easily spread. Speedy reporting can mitigate this. According to a representative working for public service, that's why it's important to publish digital updates as quickly as possible. It's a race against the clock to research and source examine facts in a crisis, he says:

We relate to source criticism in the exact same manner regardless of platform. It doesn't differ. When it comes to social media on the other hand, there is another dimension. There is a parallel reality out there the whole time. A lot of information is shared during major news events. Traditional media is to a large extent used to revealing what they know, with the focus on their own reporting. I believe in much more presence in social media to proactively respond to rumours.

Several in this study mention the importance of being present and fast on social media in crisis situations. The most effective communication can be achieved only if media are aware of how the different platforms should be used.

Speed is a way for media to compete, but also to maintain credibility, especially in an emergency situation when speed, trust and accuracy can determine the safety of people, and mitigate disasters. Respondents in this study agree that online presence and instant facts during crises are vital. During a water contamination 2014 in one of the larger cities of Sweden, the local newspaper published a digital article with the headline "Don't drink the water". It generated 170 000 page views the first two days, including 60 000 mobile views. If a story like that not had been published, many people would likely have drunk the water and become ill.

In other crises, human health may not be at stake but quick information can be just as important. The faster the media is, the less likely false information can take hold and cause rumours to escalate. On chat forums, for example, fabricated details can easily turn into threats, confrontations and potentially dangerous situations. Editors in this study offer several examples of when a slow publishing process has allowed incorrect assumptions to spread, and innocent people being pointed out. After a double murder in a small town of Sweden in the fall of 2013, the wrong people were identified in social media with names as well as photos. A lot of other misleading details were shared on the chat forum Flashback. The editor at the local paper is certain that the police could have prevented the false spin if they had been more proactive:

I have afterwards argued that they could have mitigated this disinformation by being more open themselves. They didn't comment anything until an afternoon press conference, even though it happened during the night. People don't accept these kind of big information lapses ... When people don't think we're good enough, they take the reporting into their own hands. We've got a role to fill. A lot of people think that the web is only about clicks and page views. It's not. It's about making sure people come to us, and that we maintain high credibility. Our speed is a measurement of that. If we're too sluggish, we lose trustworthiness. With digital media, we learn all the time.

Planning is very much an aspect of today's media reality. It's a necessity to ensure adequate resources for crisis reporting, and it's essential when it comes to living up to the public's expectancy of speed. Major news sites have established a routine of preparing different drafts, for the various outcomes of a news event with high public interest. Newsrooms are ready to output a story, complete with headlines and pictures, even before it happens, by pushing "publish" at the very second the news become known. This is now standard procedure for many news sites, for example when announcing winners of awards or major sports events, or for more dramatic news events when a crisis can take a new turn. A business newspaper in Sweden practices this strategy

regularly, for example when the periodic interest rate is to be revealed by Sweden's central bank, a news editor says:

Prior to the announcement, we prepare different web options so that we on the dot can push the proper teaser out, regardless of whether they keep the rate or lower it ... We shut everything else down. Everybody in the newsroom has to be quiet, and as soon as the central bank reveals the decision, we strike. The story is usually online within a couple of seconds. If the announcement is scheduled at 09.30, we have sometimes managed to publish at 09.29, if we luck out with a little late clock somewhere.

Instant coverage, news being published just as they happen, feeds expectancy. If a newsroom is quick, competent and newsworthy during one event or crisis, the public will turn to the same site again, and expect it to live up to the equivalent standard.

### *Live*

All of the news editors in the study agree that live is growing more important wherever it's audio, text, still photos, moving images, or a combination of all four. When it comes to the newspaper online content, live coverage has been pretty much exclusively used for sports and entertainment up until a few years ago. However, instant updates are now playing a significant role during crisis reporting and for major news events. A large fire raging a local shopping centre became the turning point in 2011 for a daily on the East coast. This was the first time they used a web-based live blogging tool to broadcast live commentary to its readers during a dramatic incident, the editor recalls:

We worked really well digitally, and have been trying to work in the same spirit since then. To put on a live coverage of an event is no big deal today, but it wasn't very common back then with live feeds, either by news bureaus or newspapers ... This type of reporting doesn't only work for sports, which is what we had used it for previously. It's also excellent around larger, local news events.

Since the dramatic fire, this particular newspaper has implemented live coverage as often as possible. With time, an important improvement they have attained is to launch a live promptly. That's an ambition they share with many other news providers in Sweden, and which new technique has enabled. Having short start-up times and simple technology has enabled newsrooms to take a chance early on in a news process, which has changed the strategy for many. A web manager at a medium-sized west-coast six-days-a-week paper explains their future live tactic, using a weather storm as an example:

We are going to lower the bar. We shall go live quicker and earlier, even for smaller incidents. It's so appreciated. You can always get going and then blow it off if it's not worth it. It's better to start early than to wait until the storm is over because then half of the story is already gone. A big part of this type of live reporting is preceding the occurrence: warning and informing of what's coming. Get going as quickly as possible when it feels like an opening; then back away when we think it's not blowing enough. Then we quit.

Storms and extreme weather attract a lot of web traffic, and are frequent topics for live reporting. For many of the small or medium-sized newspapers, the storms in the fall of 2013 became the starting point for live reporting of news events. Many newsrooms experienced a steady flow of questions from its readers. Local newspaper sites turned into information hubs, where reporters were expected to be experts, one web editor says:

The harder it was blowing, the more people came to us. They wanted a lot of information. Readers asked everything from "Do you think my triple pane windows will hold?" to "Where is the storm right now?"

During the crisis in Ukraine, and Russia's dramatic annexation of Crimea in March of 2014, one of the national dailies in Sweden launched a live blog, and kept it running for 48 hours in a row. It was staffed differently than previous blogs, the managing editor says:

Prior to this point, we had considered live to be the domain of the young, junior employees. "Who's the youngest? Can you sit down and cover it live?" The young are digital and the ones who live blog. Now we do the exact opposite. It's the most senior reporters, who possess the knowledge, who should blog. This time our national security reporter sat all weekend, live blogging. It had a gigantic effect. He literally received hundreds of questions.

Working with live coverage brings new demands to the newsroom process. Planning for the unplanned is difficult. To warrant accuracy and timeliness requires procedures and strategies in terms of co-ordination and preparations. As a crisis can occur any time, it's a major challenge to make sure there is sufficient staff available all the time. Large media organisations can get the upper hand by involving several departments and co-ordinate live coverage from different geographical areas. A thorough live was orchestrated in the spring of 2014 when a soccer supporter was beaten to death in southern Sweden. Two evening tabloids that belong to the same organisation were able to cover several aspects of the story, in different parts of the country. The local paper could do on-site reporting in the city where the death took place. The partner paper went live in the hometown of the supporter. The social media editor in Stockholm was very pleased with how the collaboration worked out:

We went live from several locations right away. We had a text live on the site, lots of articles, lots of photos, and a good presence in social media. We started campaigns both on social media and in print against hooligan violence. Thanks to the involvement of several departments, including sports and news, we created a broad and integrated coverage, with close to a 24-hour long live stream in TV, which was both extensive and very professional.

### *User-generated content*

Reader, listener and viewer involvement can be crucial during crisis communication, editors in this study concur. Media consumers get involved when something really concerns or upsets them.

Every-day injustices stimulate interactivity and motivate readers to contribute. This was the case when a large local morning paper in Sweden decided to investigate a local scandal. A municipal purchase of streetcars had gone wrong in a number of ways. It had led to a financial debacle, a breakdown of public transport, and a crisis of public trust in the local government. The affair had been extensively covered and was publicly critiqued because of delays, technical problems and high costs. When the newsroom after a lengthy process was able to get access to all the municipal paperwork, the publisher realized the staff wouldn't be able to handle the review on their own. They decided to turn to their readers and try open research. The publisher was overwhelmed about the response it generated:

Instead of assigning one of our reporters for maybe several months, we made all the material available on our site and asked our readers for assistance. Lawyers and investment experts got in touch and helped out. We even got a computer technician who said "If you want, I can make the data searchable for you. It'll be easier both for you and for those who will help you dig in the material." This was completely free of charge. We didn't pay anything for any of this. It was actually incredible. What made it possible was the readers' indignation about the matter. This was an issue that made our city boil. Those who volunteered their assistance were working within special fields and had the expertise that we were lacking. Some of them remained completely anonymous. Others we could interview as sources.

Newsroom representatives say that every-day injustices, or circumstances that have a direct impact on people, stimulate interactivity and motivate the public to contribute. Weather-related pictures and stories are also popular contributions. They help news sites cover a wider area, and improve the reporting, on the web.

People like to share. "I live here, and this is what it's like here." We are very grateful to receive this material. It becomes a map over how the situation is in different locations, without us having to be there.

During a crisis caused by weather storms in 2013, the digital newsroom process significantly changed in Sweden. As the storms intensified and generated very high web traffic, web reporters were able to back off while the readers took over the updates. A digital expert at one of the dailies explains how the journalistic process dramatically shifted:

In the beginning, we worked as we usually do. Web editors gathered information, explained how the transportation companies dealt with the situation, and which trains had to be cancelled. They checked with weather forecasters how the storms were progressing and reported in a live blog, where the readers also were able to ask questions. Initially readers solicited information, but after a while the editors were practically able to let go of their keyboards, lean back and just supervise what was going on. At that point the readers themselves had taken over the news reporting, submitted photos, informed about what was happening on the roads, and answered each others' questions. It was unbelievable to see how this evolved into a large community on the topic. Our job became to pick out the newsworthy stuff in this big flow, for example that a boat was about to sink in the North harbour. Okay, that's a news tip. We'll have to look into that. If correct, we could do a real story. Maybe it even should go in print tomorrow. The entire traditional method turned around. The readers published first. We controlled their information, and after that we decided whether to do journalism on it.

The advantages with user-generated content far outweigh the risk, according to editors in this study, especially during a crisis or an emergency situation where time is of the essence. A tip can generate a story, that in turn can prompt other sources to get in touch, which can lead to more stories, more cases and reader involvement.

Most of the newsrooms in this study have steered away from allowing comments on regular news articles. One of the reasons many newsrooms limit comments is the tedious moderating process, but also that the debate tend to go get out of hand. It's better to plan and offer controlled slots of interactivity, one news strategy co-ordinator says:

We shall limit public dialogue to small windows, when we know we can have the right expert on hand, instead of having a flow of questions trail in over time. We have to ensure that we can respond to the public.

Integrating social media can give a story a quick spin, if the news site has lots of followers on Facebook, for example. This can be very important for crisis reporting, and a way to reach out with crucial information.

## **Conclusions**

Media technology developments, and rapidly changed media markets, have influenced the conditions of crisis reporting in the digital age. The continuous development of working methods is increasing the speed of publishing and accommodated for real-time news delivery. This can be both a possibility and a threat. Prompt reporting is of great importance in an emergency situation, but the pressure of instant publishing can also increase the risk for mistakes, partly because of difficulties to get material verified quickly. On the other hand, slower reporting can contribute to inaccurate information spreading through other channels. Instant coverage feeds expectancy. If a newsroom is quick, competent and newsworthy during once crisis, the public will turn to the same site again, and expect it to live up to the equivalent standard.

Speed is a prerequisite for live coverage, but it works both ways. Live coverage increases the pace of reporting and is a vital component in online content publication and crisis communication today. Instant publishing is now common whenever a dramatic event unfolds, regardless of topic. Current technology has enabled newsrooms to launch lives quickly, and smart phones have greatly improved the ability for the public to receive information on the go. Nowadays, most editors agree, the most important aspect of live reporting is to get up and running as soon as possible. This can add significance to a trivial event and cause unmotivated fear, but it can also provide the public with important information early on in a crisis and hence

enable preventative measures. There are several software solutions for live reporting and moderated chats, where the public's material and views easily can be integrated.

User-generated content is closely interrelated with the other two key themes in this report: speed and live coverage. Public participation can give newsrooms the ability to cover a wider area, to which reporters are not able to get – at least not fast enough. Tips and eyewitness reports have always played a key role for media, but thanks to new technology people can now contribute with actual content. With smart phones, they can supply photos and video footage, as well as participate in live feeds with questions and updates. Media consumers get involved when they are directly impacted, be it specialist expertise in open research or trivial matters relating to their own situation. Regardless of spectrum, this accelerates media's ability to get information out in a crisis situation and improves the reporting in critical situations, editors in this study concur.

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