

QUICK RESPONSE REPORT

“Media and the ‘Politics of Disaster’ in the U.S., Latin America, and the Caribbean”¹

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The views expressed in this report are those of the author and not necessarily reflect those of the Natural Hazards Center of the University of Colorado.

ABSTRACT

Since Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast, both the academic and practitioner communities have increasingly recognized that disasters can become “political” very quickly, with serious short, middle, and long term implications for local, state, and even national officeholders. Fieldwork conducted four weeks after the Chilean earthquake in February 2010 utilized the collection of print media news in the affected and nearby areas supplemented by carefully selected and low-profile interviews with key government officials, NGO representatives, experts, and scholars. These data were further supplemented by information related to the underlying causes of the event provided by technical and scientific institutions. This study reveals the media’s significant influence in setting the agenda, framing responsibility and accountability for the consequences of the devastating earthquake-tsunami. The findings also expose the negative impacts of deficient inter-agency coordination at the time of the disaster event as well as the significant challenge of managing a natural disaster, undergoing a political and ideological “transition mode.”³

INTRODUCTION

At 3:34 a.m. on February 27, 2010, Chile suffered a devastating magnitude (M_w) 8.8 earthquake and ensuing tsunami. The destructive natural event affected a very large area of the country, including important metropolitan areas such as Santiago, Concepción, and Valparaíso-Viña del Mar.⁴ The magnitude of the disaster along with the territorial spread of the event, contributed

¹ While this is a standalone single author report for the Quick Response Research Program, much of the content, and especially the tables and discussions starting on page 11, will be folded into joint author publications with Dr. Richard Olson and Dr. Juan Pablo Sarmiento, in particular for the 2011 UNISDR Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction.

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⁴ Peter I. Yanev, Francisco Medina and Alex P. Yanev, “The Magnitude 8.8 Offshore Maule Region, Chile Earthquake of February 27, 2010, a report by the World Bank (April 2010), iii.” According to the report, the earthquake affected approximately 82% of the country’s population, with a death toll of 565 people and an estimated overall damage of 30 billion US dollars. The report

to the devastating consequences. Moreover, at the time of the event, the country suffered a major collapse in its communication network, thereby further complicating inter-agency communication and the dissemination of warnings -especially those of ensuing tsunamis.

In the midst of this major disaster, Chile had to experience a transition of government as well as a transformation of the country's ideological tincture, featured by a highly ambitious and publicized political and economic agenda by incoming President Piñera. However, following his strong emphasis on the creation of jobs as a way to expand the Chilean economy and fight the growing inequality, Piñera had to immediately turn his agenda on its head to focus on reconstructing the country, building infrastructure, providing humanitarian assistance, and reestablishing all networks devastated by the earthquake-tsunami.

The purpose of this research is to examine how the media shape political agendas in terms of responsibility and accountability in the emergency period immediately following the disaster and throughout the recovery period. With this main research question in mind, we assume that the media play a critical role in efforts related to the anticipation a disaster, the crisis itself, and the aftermath of a disaster event.

In Chile as well as worldwide, the media have played a fundamental role in the configuration of political agendas in the anticipation of a disaster event as well as in the disaster management and recovery. The media have further influenced how discourses are disseminated throughout the population, influencing the public's perception. Yet, less importance has been given to the media's possible "watchdog role" as a facilitator channel through which public accountability is generated between the population and the government. Although some traceable media actions have related to the prevention and mitigation of disasters by increasing public awareness, such actions are often short-sighted and manipulated in order to fit a specific agenda or public interests. Little attention has been focused on the media as a well-positioned actor, in terms of resources management, and possible contributor for implementing disaster risk reduction strategies at a broader level.

An important question remains: How do the media shape political agendas in attributing responsibility and accountability during pre and post-disaster periods? Several research questions are related to this driving question: How can the media maintain a "watchdog" role over government officials without losing attention after a disaster? How can the media contribute to raising public awareness in preventing and mitigating disaster risk?

Research Questions and Methodology

This study utilized collection of print media news and other articles in the affected and nearby areas, supplemented by electronic media and low-profile interviews with two different groups: a) mid-level experts and technical personnel in national institutions dedicated to hazard analysis and disaster risk management and b) selected higher ranked decision-makers in key institutions who interacted with the media in framing responsibility and accountability as well

further warns that this estimation will increase to 50-60 billion US dollars once "interior damage and business interruption" are included in the assessment. See World Bank, iii.

as how disasters influence issue agendas in affected local communities and at the national level. The original sample size of this research was designed to range between 20 and 50 people. Research questions included: How do local media in the disaster zone and nearby areas affect local and national political agendas and the most impacted communities while “framing” responsibility and accountability for the hazard event becoming a disaster- even a catastrophe- in the immediate post-impact emergency period extending into recovery? How can the media maintain a “watchdog role” over government officials without losing attention after a disaster event? How can the media contribute to raising public awareness in preventing and mitigating disaster risk?

In most disaster environments, a quick response is of significant value because most local media are themselves affected and their coverage can be surprisingly perishable. One of the major problems is that retention and archiving become selective – creating gaps that make subsequent research very difficult. A quick response establishes verified “first constructions” in the media that can then serve as baselines for later analyses.

The methodology used in this research combined early media tracking and interviews with government officials, NGO representatives, experts, and scholars. Early tracking media consisted of the collection of print media news focusing on varied ideological media in both the national capital (Santiago) and the principal disaster zone city (Concepción). Content analysis was utilized to analyze the data, supplemented by information from technical and scientific institutions related to the underlying causes of the event as well as by carefully selected low-profile interviews.

Chile’s Earthquake and Tsunami

The present section provides an in-depth examination of the lack of coordination among the agencies operating under the National System of Civil Protection, the role of the media in “framing” the public agenda (responsibility and accountability issues), technical challenges in addressing hazards and disasters, the “blame game” and political transition, and implications for future events.

Considering that natural disasters often alter coordination networks in the affected countries, the dimension of Chile’s disaster cannot be taken for granted. Interviews with government officials, NGO representatives, experts, and scholars indicated that a total collapse and lack of coordination among agencies occurred. This was especially evident in the conflictive relationship between Onemi (Oficina Nacional de Emergencias), responsible for activating the emergency network throughout Chile and Shoa (Servicio Hidrográfico y Oceanográfico de la Armada de Chile).⁵ Felipe Ward, deputy for the Independent Democratic Union (UDI)⁶ and part

⁵ The major discrepancies among Onemi, Shoa and the executive power headed by President Michelle Bachelet, revolved around the lack of a tsunami warning and its devastating impacts. A confidential report by the Army’s Commander in Chief, Admiral Edmundo Gonzalez to General Cristian Le Dantec, reveals that Shoa dismissed the possibility of a tsunami in its communication with President Bachelet. Onemi, responsible for activating the emergency system, subsequently dismissed the possibility of a tsunami. However, Shoa maintains that the organization communicated with Onemi via fax, pointing out that the earthquake had a sufficient magnitude to generate a possible tsunami, in addition, at 3:55 a.m. there was a tsunami alert to the Onemi, via high frequency communication. However, Carmen Fernandez, Onemi’s director at the time, pointed out that the

of the “Coalition for Change” that brought Piñera to the national office, noted that Chile needs to undergo a reassessment of public policies, despite the fact that –in this country- policies are often applied but not assessed in detail. Discrepancies between Shoa and Onemi arose specifically on the tsunami warning. In a report presented by Shoa to the new administration, the organization acknowledged having initially given the alert, but that –due to technical and administrative errors-the alert was dismissed, ignoring accredited sources such as the NOAA of United States that indicated the opposite. Consequently, the alert was cancelled at 4:56 a.m., although huge waves continued to hit the coast until 6:30 a.m.⁷

Looking at the lack of coordination among agencies and the delay in humanitarian assistance, Carmen Paz from the Universidad de Chile noted that the magnitude of the event contributed to the initial chaos in emergency management.⁸ Paz pointed out that, in Concepción, where much of the looting took place; social unrest began immediately after the earthquake. The fact that the armed forces arrived three days later, further complicated the crisis. Jorge Ortiz (Universidad de Chile) pointed out that the earthquake-tsunami revealed a lack of political-military relationship for disaster management.⁹

In regard to the media’s “watchdog role”-as a gatekeeper of accountability-, Ward emphasized that Chile’s media have played a very important role in recent decades, following a regional trend where communication networks and media outlets have developed more positive public perception than institutional powers. He also noted that President’s Piñera’s agenda has been turned on its head, with a major focus on housing and infrastructure. Ortiz, from the Universidad de Chile, noted that media outlets often focus attention on what causes more impact. Yet, according to Ward, the challenge in the medium term is not to lose the most important referents of the original pre-disaster agenda, but rather to be able to fulfill both. In the earthquake-tsunami event, where the media could have contributed to easing the emergency, it did not – although Castro revealed that certain journalists played a critical role in the early humanitarian assistance, reaching remote places that otherwise do not receive attention. Hence, the media began to identify the needs in remote communities affected by the disaster, thereby guiding political agendas. In the same line of argument, Davor Gjuranovic, host of National Television of Chile,¹⁰ revealed that the media were the first actors to arrive in the affected communities in the midst of the lack of coordination among national emergency agencies. He pointed out that media networks filled the gap left by national government

fax was illegible and denied any kind of tsunami warning given by Shoa. Shoa acknowledged a shared responsibility in the casualties of the tsunami. According to the report, the tsunami consisted of three major waves, the first one occurred at 5:00 a.m., the second at 5:30 a.m. being the most intense and the one that caused most damage, and the third one occurred at 6:05 a.m. See *El Mercurio*, March 3, 2010, C2, “Jefe naval reconoce que Armada descartó riesgo de tsunami al informar a Bachelet.”

⁶ Interview with Felipe Ward (Deputy UDI), Santiago, Chile, March 2010.

⁷ See *La Tercera*, March 24, 2010, “Armada pide salida de ex jefe Shoa por levantar alerta de tsunami,”

http://diario.latercera.com/2010/03/24/01/contenido/9_27336_9.shtml

⁸ Interview with Carmen Paz Castro (Professor, Geography Department – Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, Universidad de Chile), Santiago, Chile, March 2010.

⁹ Interview with Jorge Ortiz (Professor, Geography Department – Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, Universidad de Chile), Santiago, Chile, March 2010.

¹⁰ Interview with Davor Gjuranovic, Television Nacional de Chile, March 2010.

authorities, where chaos and a lack of coordination dominated the scene. This absence was critically deepened by the “transition mode” in which the country was functioning, with the Bachelet administration leaving and the incoming Piñera government stepping into a major ideological and political transition.

This paper argues that the media are critical actors in emergency crisis situations and contribute greatly to shaping and framing political agendas in the disaster aftermath. It is also important to note that the comprehensive media coverage of Chile’s earthquake and tsunami was determinant in preparing the country for the reconstruction phase. As posted in an editorial by the newspaper *La Nación*,¹¹ “the intensive coverage of the media, along with the new information technologies –the Internet, YouTube and Twitter-, has restructured the way in which the population relates communicational and sensitively with the catastrophe...”¹² The editorial emphasized that, because of the nature of the coverage, it became the first natural disaster of significant magnitude to be transmitted “almost live” as it occurred. Yet, many of the interviewees in Chile mentioned that the country is in immediate need of a more diverse ideological spectrum in media networks, especially in daily newspapers, such as *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera*. This limitation was underscored in a *La Nación* editorial explaining that –on the same day that President Bachelet was transferring power to President-elect Piñera- the Director of *La Nación*, Marcelo Castillo, was leaving the post for good.¹³ Castillo noted that “Chile needs to diversify urgently its offering of communication media, especially in the daily press, which is the one that shapes the political perception in the country...only the existence of multiple media able to reach the public ensures pluralism, and in the last instance, democracy...”¹⁴ He further argued that the challenge is to overcome the fact that the new government took office without any real opposition from the media outlet, where most of the newspapers in the country are under the control of two main groups following the “same ideological sensitivity.”¹⁵

During an interview with Irina Salgado (Onemi)¹⁶ and its communication team, participants argued that the institution maintains an “open door” policy with all communication networks in the aftermath of a disaster, facilitating communication with the population. The media team suggested that a lack of specialization in media networks has occurred, which is critical during emergency management. In a disaster-prone country as Chile, some journalists often fail to distinguish between Richter and Mercalli, or magnitude from intensity, suggesting the need to train journalists in emergency management so that they are better able to convey the information to the general population. Indeed, the coverage of the February 2010 earthquake-tsunami was tainted, marked by a lack of objectivity and knowledge. Looking at the indicators of risk identification and risk reduction, the institution team lamented that measures of disaster

¹¹ See *La Nación*, “El terremoto y la reorganización de la sociedad civil,” March 8, 2010, p. 12, <http://www.lanacion.cl/el-terremoto-y-la-reorganizacion-de-la-sociedad-civil/noticias/2010-03-08/193722.html>

¹² Ibid

¹³ See *La Nación*, “Orgullosos y satisfechos,” March 11, 2010, <http://www.lanacion.cl/noticias/site/artic/20100310/pags/20100310201700.html>

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Interview with Irina Salgado, Chief of Department of Coordination and Diffusion – Onemi, Santiago, March 2010.

risk reduction carried out by Onemi (e.g., preparation, drills, media brochures, campaigns) are not covered during disaster-free periods due to the fact that the topic is not “sellable” and requires extensive efforts.¹⁷

Another interesting issue noted by the Onemi communication team was the need to differentiate between the way in which national media and regional media shape political agendas. For example, Salgado mentioned that after the renounce of Onemi’s Director, journalist Carmen Fernandez - over discrepancies of whether the Onemi was responsible in not giving the tsunami alert- the media stopped criticizing Onemi. Meanwhile, although it is often more difficult to get the national media to cover disaster prevention and mitigation efforts, the exact opposite occurs with the regional media. Examples include the multiple drills practiced in Iquique, Arica, Antofagasta, and Valparaiso -localities with ample experience in drills, even at night. Salgado suggests that the situation in the north is more favorable for such preparation exercises because in recent decades the people there have been advised of the likely chance of a major earthquake-tsunami. Not surprisingly, the Onemi team also emphasized the lack of education among journalists related to issues of civil protection. Onemi offers all communication networks a mobile course on civil protection that can be taught in the media network’s location at its convenience. Yet in the last year, only one media outlet (“Buenos Dias,” TVN) participated in this effort.

Assessing how the disaster impacted Onemi’s role, Ward pointed out that in order for the organization to “survive,” it needs to undergo great changes. Being a centralized unit that lacks the necessary technology, Onemi must develop better coordination with the regions and have an appropriate budget in order to operate.¹⁸ Paz believes that the organization did not have the capacity to deal with a disaster of such magnitude and intensity. Osvaldo Henríquez, Chief of the Department of Policies and Decentralization of the Ministry of Interior’s Subdere,¹⁹ also noted the complex relationship between Onemi and the Universidad de Chile, where the former relies upon technical information provided by the Universidad de Chile that operates under administrative schedule, therefore allowing for significant “information gaps” in the meantime. The fact that Onemi operated under the umbrella of the Ministry of Interior, lacking autonomy, further complicated the situation.²⁰

It has been recently acknowledged that disasters can become political very rapidly, altering political agendas at both the local and national levels (Olson, 2000). This assumption relies on the fact that disasters quickly shake political agendas while identifying new priorities and urgencies in the national agenda during emergency periods. In the case of Chile’s 8.8 magnitude earthquake-tsunami, the disaster not only shook the national agenda but also occurred during

¹⁷ Ibid. In addition, the situation in some municipalities adds to the challenge of implementing measures of disaster risk. One example of this is the drills in the V region: some communities did not participate in the drill effort arguing that preparing for “the risk of tsunami” interfered with the tourism industry.

¹⁸ Interview with Felipe Ward (Deputy, UDI), Santiago, Chile, March 2010.

¹⁹ Interview with Osvaldo Henríquez, Chief of the Department of Policies and Decentralization of the Ministry of Interior’s Subdere, Santiago, Chile, March 2010.

²⁰ Interview with Carmen Paz Castro (Professor-Department of Geography, Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo - Universidad de Chile), Santiago, Chile, March 2010.

the government's political transition that further constituted a major ideological change in a country that had been governed by la "Concertacion" for the previous twenty years.

In regard to the underlying causes of the event, Ward noted that although natural disasters are unforeseeable events their devastating impacts can be anticipated. In the case of Chile, Ward pointed out that the lack of satellite telephones further deepened the existing emergency crisis. Examining the role of the media during the disaster, the deputy criticized the fact that media networks were broadcasting "live" not only the latest developments of the earthquake-tsunami, but also the looting and social unrest that followed the event.²¹ Indeed, the lack of coordination in the aftermath of the disaster has been identified as a critical area in the management of the earthquake-tsunami. According to Ward, this lack of coordination quickly became evident when President Bachelet dismissed the possibility of a tsunami in the coastal areas of the country.²²

During disaster management, it is important that the media avoid the so-called "blame game." Chile's media have certainly taken issue regarding attributions of blame between the outgoing Bachelet administration and the incoming Piñera administration. The daily *El Mercurio* specifically referred to these differences by noting that "Piñera tried to give a distention signal in order to publicly neutralize the advertised discrepancies that featured the relationship between the future government and the current authorities in the midst of the tragedy."²³ In fact, the article referred to a meeting outlining the framework to confront both the population and the media, in which Bachelet would assume the leading role in the tragedy while Piñera would assume a collaborator role until March 11 –the established date for when he was to take office. The article also noted that Piñera's attitude toward the Bachelet administration turned much more critical in private meetings, where he emphasized that the government response could have been much more rapid, especially in the declaration of a state of catastrophe in the Maule and Biobío regions.²⁴

Another aspect of the media's "watchdog role" regarding government institutions' need to reduce risks (i.e., risk reduction indicator) is its key role in denouncing deficiencies in construction measures that could have been taken into consideration to reduce risks. In this tone, the daily *El Mercurio* published an article indicating that Chile does not enforce architectural finishes that have to be regulated. The building code establishes only that the overall construction has to be anti-seismic; it does not mention anything regarding building finishes. According to Rodolfo Saragoni, an engineer specializing in the seismic design of the Universidad de Chile, the failure apparently lies in the lack of enforcement regarding what kind of construction exists within the structures.²⁵ The *El Mercurio* article called for more enforcement, noting that the norm only specifies that decorations have to be tightly attached, without mentioning any requisites or guidelines. Saragoni expected that one of the lessons

²¹ Interview with Felipe Ward (Deputy UDI), Santiago, Chile, March 2010.

²² Ibid

²³ See *El Mercurio*, March 2, 2010, C. 21 "Bachelet y Piñera acuerdan evitar críticas públicas y coordinar esfuerzos ante crisis," <http://diario.elmercurio.cl/detalle/index.asp?id={60e7871b-c13c-40d4-9ce7-223d86a3d392}>

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ See *El Mercurio*, March 3, 2010, B3, "En Chile las terminaciones no están reguladas," <http://diario.elmercurio.cl/detalle/index.asp?id={dd167c8f-0ac4-4fd6-9716-abb5e0124411}>

learned from the devastating recent earthquake would be the need to enforce anti-seismic construction by including all ornamentation elements and finishes. Such measures would contribute to better implementing risk reduction efforts to prevent and mitigate the impacts of a disaster. Another issue that has come to the forefront of the analysis is the communication system, which absolutely collapsed after the disaster, subsequently exposing notorious failures not only of technical equipment, but also of logistic capacity. Finally, the article relied on the need to comply with the initial agenda points that Piñera set out during his campaign in order to aspire to the creation of new jobs and higher levels of growth.

An article published in the local newspaper *El Sur* in Concepcion noted that experts warned about the tsunami risk in Talcahuano as early as 2009.²⁶ In a joint study conducted by the United States and Chile and supported by the National Geographic Society, the professionals noted the risk of a possible tsunami in Talcahuano and emphasized the need to educate the population about these issues in order to reduce risk and vulnerability, especially considering the fact that local construction and development were taking place in flat and low areas.²⁷ One of the main deficiencies in risk reduction efforts identified at the time was the lack of early warning systems. An article published in *La Tercera* on March 15, 2010, revealed the challenges faced by the Chilean state in the reconstruction, noting that one of the biggest challenges for the reconstruction was the weakness of the state in the coordination of organizations distributed throughout the country.²⁸ The article emphasized that, due to the magnitude of the disaster, this challenge would likely increase, affecting its programming capacity due to the emergency crisis.²⁹ Ivan Poduje has argued the need to diagnose and weigh damages, gathering relevant information previously collected by other organizations as such information is critical for developing a comprehensive recovery plan involving all phases (demolition, rehabilitation, and future urbanization).³⁰ In order to reduce vulnerability, the article pointed to the need to take advantage of the rubble to be utilized in other efforts to reduce further vulnerability in the coastal area.

In a seismic-prone country like Chile, it is commendable that the country's seismological science is –along with that of Mexico– acknowledged as one of the best in South America despite the fact that only a few seismologists and their teams develop most of the research on seismic-related activity in the country. In an interview with *El Mercurio*, Jaime Campos noted that in the immediate aftermath– the lack of appropriate seismic instruments delayed a more rapid reaction to the disaster.³¹ Falling within the phases of risk identification and risk reduction Campos advocated for a research program on earth sciences –focused on earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanoes– to help better react to such disasters. Interestingly, Campos revisited the idea that disasters are conditioned by human actions, where not only the intrinsic capacity

²⁶ See *El Sur*, "Científicos advirtieron hace un año el riesgo de tsunami en Talcahuano," Concepción, April 11, 2010, 12 http://www.elsur.cl/base_elsur/site/artic/20100411/pags/20100411002600.html

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ See *La Tercera*, "Instituciones para la reconstrucción", by Ivan Poduje, March 15, 2010, http://latercera.com/contenido/895_233931_9.shtml

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ See *El Mercurio*, "La falta de instrumentos sísmicos apropiados retrasa una reacción más oportuna," March 1, 2010, A.13, <http://diario.elmercurio.cl/detalle/index.asp?id={ac272d2c-a271-4215-9ee8-019354412d59}>

of hazards causes damage, but also the inability of humanity to reduce levels of vulnerability. Campos concluded by noting the challenge that the seismic norm has to be regularly adjusted after a disaster event.

In an in-depth interview recently held in Santiago,³² Director of the Servicio Sismológico de Chile (Universidad de Chile) Sergio Barrientos noted the need to develop joint scientific research with international partners on Chile's post-earthquake aftermath aimed at improving practices and techniques to address these kinds of hazards. In this regard, he indicated that approximately 140 seismic stations have been established along the rupture zone to continue monitoring the existing aftershocks. In addition, the Seismological Service of Chile and scholars from the Geophysical Department at the University of Chile along with international partners - including GeoForschung Zentrum of Potsdam (GFZ); Instituto de Física del Globo de París (IPGP); Escuela Normal Superior (ENS), Incorporated Research Institutions for Seismology (IRIS), United States Geological Survey (USGS), California Institute of Technology, Liverpool University, and Cambridge University- have established a post-earthquake observation network.³³ In analyzing the number of casualties Paz noted that out of the official number of victims (521)³⁴ only 25% approximately died as a direct result of the earthquake. The majority of victims died as a consequence of the tsunami. This is where the failure to give a proper tsunami warning carries a heavy weight.

Rodrigo Vidal Rojas, a city planning expert at the Usach argued that, when dealing with tsunamis, there is a need reverse the lack of seismic culture in Chile, expressed in ways such as "beaches developed at sea level; coastal settlements without an alarm system of tsunamis...structures designed for medium intensity earthquakes..."³⁵ In short, Vidal Rojas is pointed to the existing and new vulnerability creation, aggravating the possible damaging effects of a hazard event, going back to the often-utilized equation that hazard x vulnerability= risk. In order to be better able to deal with the initial two phases of the conceptual framework of risk management (risk identification and risk reduction), we have to begin dealing with the creation of increased vulnerability.

At the beginning of this paper, we stated that -since Hurricane Katrina-both academic and practitioner communities have increasingly recognized that disasters can quickly become "political," with serious short, middle, and long term implications for national, state, and local officeholders. The findings of Chile's earthquake-tsunami event may ultimately help address hazards and disasters in the United States. Some parallel challenges are evident in the post-risk management of Chile's earthquake-tsunami and that of Hurricane Katrina -namely, the difficulties in inter-agency coordination culminating in the aggravation of disaster impacts; the criticized role played by the National Emergency Agency; the social unrest in the aftermath

³² Interview with Sergio Barrientos, Director Instituto Sismológico de Chile (Universidad de Chile), Santiago, Chile, March 2010.

³³ Sergio Barrientos, "Terremoto Cauquenes 27 de febrero 2010" – Informe Técnico Actualizado 27 de mayo 2010-, Servicio Sismológico, Report prepared by Sergio Barrientos, Universidad de Chile, Santiago, May 27, 2010.

³⁴ Data from the Ministry of Interior, available at <http://www.interior.gov.cl/>

³⁵ See *La Nación*, "Los tsunamis no matan" March 18, 2010, by Rodrigo Vidal Rojas (USACH), <http://www.lanacion.cl/los-tsunamis-no-matan/noticias/2010-03-17/214016.html>

(authority gap, looting, and lack of/confusing information); and a sequence of events that greatly exceeded existing capacities and available resources.

Chile is now what scientists and experts call a “live lab,” with research on seismic activity being conducted along the country’s coastal area. The results and findings of such research activity can contribute to seismic knowledge, building design, construction practices, building codes, soil studies, and urban planning. The intensity and spread of the 8.8 magnitude earthquake and subsequent tsunami can provide some lessons and implications for disaster-prone regions. Considering the level of expertise and scientific development in Chile, there is a potential for joint research activity that can mutually benefit Chile and the United States and contribute to efforts to address these types of hazards. A recent report by the World Bank³⁶ on assessment damage and engineering recommendations after the disaster event concluded that Chile’s disaster event presented both “lessons of successful earthquake engineering” and the identification of “areas that require improvement.”³⁷ The report emphasized the need to deepen the study of tsunamis, which is still underdeveloped in this region. Considering that the earthquake affected approximately 82% of the country’s population, its infrastructure was able to withstand much of the resulting damage. However, the report emphasized the need to develop and maintain a “systematic program of risk reduction and response preparation”³⁸ looking at both potential earthquakes and resulting tsunamis.³⁹

Media, Risk Management and the Political Realm

Media coverage of a disaster often begins the transformation of local public, institutional, and decision agendas, the understanding of which is crucial for analyzing and explaining the agenda dynamics and the on-the-ground evolution of the affected community as it enters and passes through recovery and reconstruction. Therefore, the role of the media in natural disasters cannot be underestimated. The development of communication systems has allowed for instant connections overseas, widespread dissemination of messages, alerts warnings and complete coverage of major metropolitan areas as well as remote locations throughout vast territories. The case of Chile is no different; the country has developed ample coverage networks in broadcast media, radio stations, and local networks. Interestingly, local media (especially radio stations) served a prominent role in the immediate emergency period after the earthquake, yet clear messages could not be conveyed to the population due to the communication failures and the complications that local media had gain information from international media stations (especially neighboring Argentina).

In order to assess how media outlets shape responsibility and accountability, influencing political agendas in disasters, we need to identify a series of indicators to measure the four main roles of the media in disaster events: i) Whistle-Blowing; ii) Information/Education; iii) Recognition; iv) Forming Public Perception. In the aftermath of a disaster, the media can play a critical role in identifying “what went wrong” –a function clearly related to its role in shaping

³⁶ Peter I. Yanev, Francisco Medina, and Alex P. Yanev, iii.

³⁷ Ibid, 3.

³⁸ Ibid, 36.

³⁹ Ibid.

accountability and responsibility at the government level by identifying risk reduction issues omitted or not considered, that could have prevented or mitigated the impact of the disaster. This role of the media is critical in shaping national and local agendas as it involves the monitoring and tracking of governmental actions related to public officials' actions in disaster-free periods. In our case study, the media soundly performed as a "whistle-blower" regarding deficiencies in the civil defense network, identifying acute errors in inter-agency communication (Onemi – Shoa) that resulted in deaths that may have been avoided. The media's notorious coverage of the internal Shoa investigation and beyond, the misunderstandings between internal communications (fax transmitted to Onemi by Shoa, phone communications with President Bachelet), and the revealed gaps in emergency management (in a disaster-prone country that takes pride in its disaster preparation through building codes, enforcement, etc) made this particular role of the media, crucial. Meanwhile, the coverage of the Chilean case in the informative/educative dimension has mixed results. Interviewees tended to agree on the fact that the media had a "missed opportunity" early in the emergency that largely contributed to the isolated social unrest in the affected localities by broadcasting "live" without any kind of editing, especially in the looting incidents. This attitude - acknowledging the unintentional result of tolerating/ promoting unrest- was widely criticized throughout the in-depth interviews in Chile. Moreover, moving away from the emergency management period, the media began to perform successfully in informing the population of the causes, consequences, and implications of the disaster. The media in Chile has yet to accomplish the positive role of accomplishment recognition by raising awareness of disaster risk and creating networks with civil society to better address disaster impacts. Finally, at the core of this paper lies the leverage of the media in "setting" the agenda or "reflecting" the public's perception.

Table 1. The Role of the Media in Disaster Events

The Role of the Media	Disaster Events
Whistle-Blowing / Watchdog	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The media have a clear role in identifying “what went wrong” in a disaster event. ▪ Performing “watchdog” role on government institutions on how to reduce risk (revealing deficiencies of national structures in preventing/mitigating risk).
Informative / Educative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sustained coverage of risk issues (local settlements, building codes, enforcement) ▪ Improving education on disasters to better communicate the message (disaster training courses, emergency management and communication). ▪ Monitoring & Tracking on successes and failures. ▪ Disseminate clear and concise messages. ▪ Avoid “blame game.”
Success / Accomplishment Recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Work with government officials in raising awareness in disaster issues. ▪ Create networks with civil society to improve communication for the next disaster event.
Forming the Public Agenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The media interacts with the population in a) setting the agenda and b) reflecting people’s public perception.

When assessing media leverage in shaping national and local agendas in responsibility and accountability issues in disaster aftermath, we need to identify the four phases of the conceptual framework for risk management: i) Risk Identification; 2) Risk Reduction; 3) Disaster Management; and iv) Disaster Recovery. The importance of risk management lies on the fact that its aim is to “reduce or mitigate existing risks.”⁴⁰ In *Time to Pass the Baton* Sarmiento Prieto defines risk management as “the component of the social system that is made up of an efficient planning, organizing, direction and control process, which is designed to analyze and reduce risk, handle adverse events and assist in recovery after they have occurred.”⁴¹ As a general finding of this study in regard to risk management, we argue that a “response bias” occurred in the organizational system (all civil, technical, and military agencies involved in the post-disaster emergency), resulting in little attention to risk identification and risk reduction issues.

⁴⁰ Sarmiento, Juan Pablo (ed.) 2008. *Time to Pass the Baton*. International Resources Group (IRG), U.S. Agency for International Development’s Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA), 11

⁴¹ Ibid

Table 2. The Conceptual Framework of Risk Management

The Conceptual Framework of Risk Management ⁴²	Disaster Events
Risk Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identification of hazards and vulnerabilities. ▪ Risk assessments, building risk scenarios ▪ Cost-benefit analysis
Risk Reduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prevention, mitigation ▪ Financing and risk transfer.
Disaster Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Early warning ▪ Preparedness and response
Disaster Recovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rehabilitation and reconstruction.

We have already noted that disasters can become rapidly political with serious short, middle, and long term implications for local, state, and even national officeholders. The fact that the media play a determinant role in shaping national and local agendas in the aftermath of a disaster obliges us not to underestimate the political realm of disasters. First, constitutional rights emphasize that one of the primordial functions of the nation-state is the provision of security for all of its citizens. Second, government institutions operate within the boundaries of institutional mandates, which determine the regulatory framework to operate during disaster emergency crisis. This applies not only to civil defense organizations, but also to scientific and military institutions. Third, the issue of political representation in disasters raises some questions. In the aftermath of a disaster, where the “blame game” is at the forefront of media coverage, which groups are political actors representing? Is it only the affected population or maybe vested private interests that could be negatively affected in the aftermath of a disaster? Such questions cannot be taken for granted and need to be assessed in light of indicators such as constitutional mandates in relation to security issues (life, property, land), regulatory frameworks determining the boundaries of responsibilities of organizations involved in emergency management, and how the media “forms” public perception in the aftermath of a disaster in relation to interest groups and the people.

Table 3. Political Realm in Disaster Events

Political Realm	Disaster Events
Constitutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Primordial function of the nation-state. ▪ Security principle
Institutional Mandate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Regulatory framework for emergency crisis.
Interests (Parties, Unions, Economic Bodies) vs People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Constituents vs interests groups

⁴² This conceptual framework draws on the conceptual framework of risk management developed in *Passing the Baton*, and is utilized with permission by the author.

Three-Dimensional Assessment of Disaster Impact

This section examines three layers that interact in the process of assessing disasters: the media dimension, the risk management dimension, and the political dimension. The findings of this research suggest that media outlets often perform in four main roles in the aftermath of a disaster: 1) whistle-blowing, 2) pure informative and educative, 3) recognition of successes and 4) formation of public agenda. The analysis demonstrates that, in the Chilean context, these three roles came together in “forming” public opinion perception and then interacted with the setting of the public agenda. In regard to risk management the findings reveal that the Chilean earthquake-tsunami demonstrated a “response bias” in the organizational system (civil defense agencies in disaster emergency crisis), with little emphasis on disaster risk reduction efforts. The political dimension was dominated by a political transition that further deepened the emergency crisis, with noticeable authority gaps, complicating emergency management even more. This transition also opened the door to an acute “blame game” related to responsibility, accountability, and disaster management issues between the outgoing Bachelet administration and the incoming Piñera administration in the midst of the disaster crisis. Furthermore, the findings suggest that some civil-military gaps emerged in the response to the disaster, especially considering the delayed action in the immediate emergency and looting incidents. The fact that the Bachelet administration delayed military intervention for almost three days, contributing to a confusing environment in terms of agencies in charge and political authority. The interviewees highlighted conspicuous differences in styles of political representations in the disaster aftermath (social focus vs. private sector focus) between the Bachelet and Piñera administrations, suggesting a venue for further analysis.

Conclusions

This study confirmed a crucial role of the media in shaping and framing national and local agenda in responsibility and accountability issues in disaster aftermath early on in the emergency period. The earthquake and tsunami in Chile quickly turned “political,” dramatically modifying the last days of the Bachelet administration and turning the public agenda of incoming President Piñera on its head in setting implications for local, state, and national stakeholders.

Beyond Chile’s earthquake and tsunami, disaster management must focus attention on the need to address the issue of hazard, vulnerability and risk assessment in the region using a comprehensive approach to articulate the efforts of the different institutions and organizations involved in a systematic and sustainable way. The United States could play a critical role in developing more systematic and sustainable capacity building in the region.

In sum, the findings revealed a determinant influence of media outlets in setting the public agenda as well as framing responsibility and accountability issues for the consequences of the disaster event in Chile’s post-emergency period. They also exposed the gaps and deficiencies in the emergency inter-agency coordination that resulted in the aggravation of the disaster impacts. Another finding of this study relates to the main role of the media in performing its “whistle-blowing/watchdog role,” thereby influencing public opinion perception and interacting

with the public agenda setting. In terms of risk management, public policies in the country fell short in disaster risk reduction efforts -especially in the coastal affected areas- as well as in land use management, favoring a “response bias” in the organizational system. Ultimately, these findings suggest the need to further explore the deficiencies of civil-military linkages in post-disaster crises.⁴³

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⁴³ The data and findings of this study are expected to be expanded by a broader comparative research at the regional level on the role of the media, political agendas and accountability issues in disasters, developed at the Disaster Risk Reduction Program at Florida International University.