

Understanding Media as a Prerequisite for Developing Crisis Communication Strategies: Evidence from a National Consumer Panel

Martina Mikrut Nadsombat¹, Ksenija Lukić², Lucija Živković³

¹PhD, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Law, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia

²Advanced Master of European Studies (A.M.E.S.), Research and Development Consultant, Osijek, Croatia

³MSc in Economics, Teaching Assistant at the Faculty of Law, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia

✉ **Corresponding author:**
lucijazivkovic2@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates patterns of media use and trust during crises. For this work, data from the IPSOS agency were used, which were collected as part of the ongoing, syndicated research conducted by IPSOS, a significantly broader research project with over 300 market, psychographic, media, and socio-demographic variables in Croatia (N = 3,667). The research identifies the dominant sources of information and analyses the demographic determinants of media consumption and trust. Findings reveal that while the Internet is the most frequently used medium for general and crisis-related information, trust in media remains fragmented. Older demographics tend to exhibit a more substantial reliance on traditional media, including television and radio. At the same time, younger populations prefer online channels but exhibit lower levels of trust in media. The results provide an empirical foundation for constructing crisis communication strategies that ensure both reach and credibility.

KEYWORDS: crisis communication, media trust, Croatia, information behaviour.

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Introduction

In times of crisis, the quality and transparency of communication can significantly influence public trust and behavioural responses. Crisis communication is not merely the dissemination of information but an essential component of crisis management that reduces uncertainty and builds social resilience. According to Mihalinić (2018), information needs intensify rapidly during crises, making strategic communication coordination among all stakeholders crucial. Previous research (Plenković, 2015; Bilaver, 2020) emphasises that both media and crises share the element of immediacy—actions provoke reactions, and speed defines relevance. However, the rise of misinformation, especially online, challenges this dynamic by introducing noise into the information ecosystem. The present study aims to explore which media channels citizens most frequently use and which they trust during crises, providing empirical data to inform effective communication strategies.

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual foundation of this paper is grounded in established communication theories, including the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) by Coombs (2007) and Image Repair Theory by Benoit (1997). These frameworks underline the importance of message consistency, responsibility acknowledgement, and reputation management during crises. According to SCCT, stakeholders evaluate crisis messages based on perceived responsibility and organisational transparency. Therefore, credibility and the choice of medium are integral to maintaining trust. Image Repair Theory further suggests that credibility repair depends not only on message content but also on the medium of delivery. Thus, understanding how audiences use and trust different media provides essential insight for designing targeted crisis responses.

Methodology

This paper employs data from the IPSOS agency in 2023. The survey is carried out biannually on a nationally representative sample of 3,667 respondents aged 18–65. According to Ipsos (2022), data collection involves a combination of face-to-face interviews (25% of respondents) and online panels (75%). The study examines the frequency of media use, trust, and information-seeking habits. The demographic structure of respondents includes a gender balance (50% men, 50% women) with the majority (62%) aged 30–59. Regional distribution reflects Croatia's geography: 28% in Zagreb and its surroundings, 17% in northern Croatia, 15% in Slavonia, 8% in Lika and Banovina, 12% in Istria and the Coast, and 20% in Dalmatia. These parameters ensure coverage of both urban and rural populations, allowing the identification of regional communication disparities.

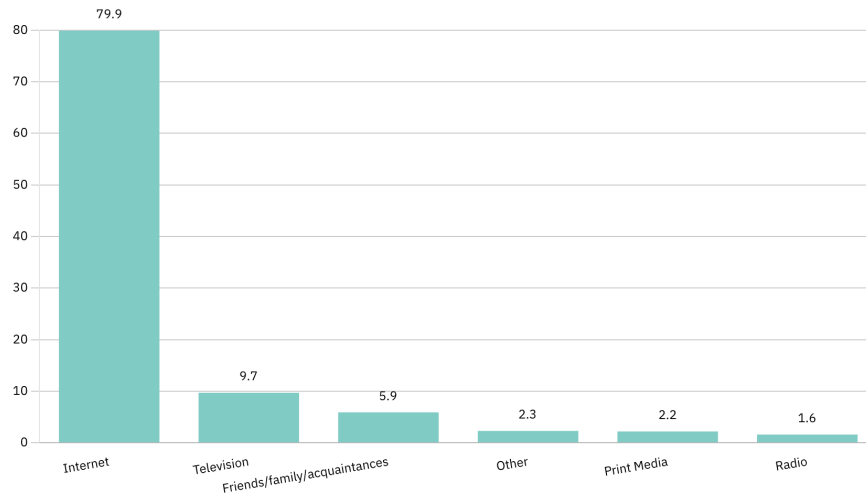
Results and Discussion

The analysis identifies the Internet as the predominant source of general information (79.9%), followed by television (9.7%). Word-of-mouth channels such as family and friends account for 5.9%, while

print and radio combined represent less than 4%. This confirms a clear digital orientation in information-seeking behaviour.

Figure 1

Primary source for finding general information (National, 2023)

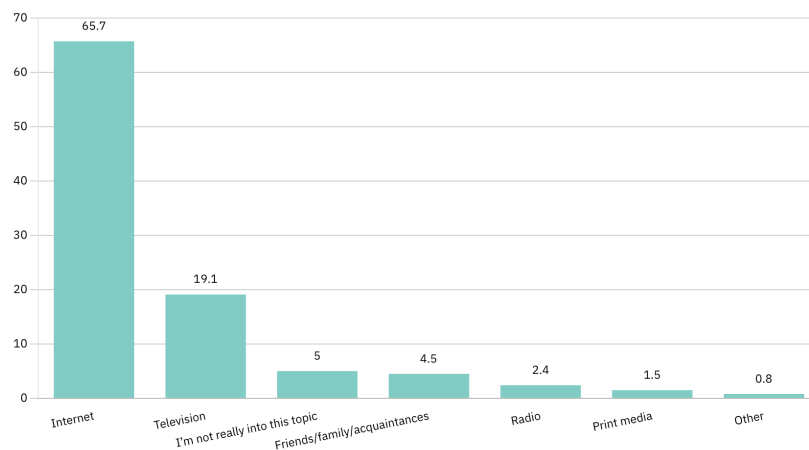


Source: author's own development

When focusing on current events in Croatia and worldwide, the Internet remains dominant (65.7%), but television rises to 19.1%, reflecting its continued importance for breaking news and authoritative reporting. This shift suggests that traditional broadcast media still play a vital role in high-stakes or rapidly developing crises.

Figure 2

Primary source for current events in Croatia and worldwide (National, 2023)

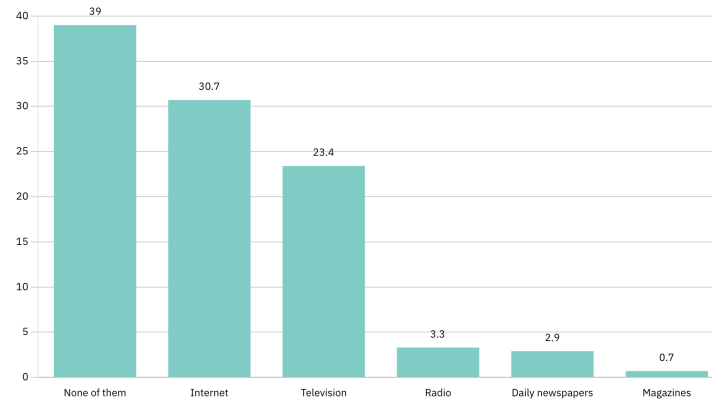


Source: author's own development

Trust data reveal an alarming pattern: 39% of respondents claim they do not trust any medium, while 31% trust the Internet and 23% trust television. Radio and print fall below 4%. The discrepancy between media usage and trust highlights a central dilemma for communicators: the most widely used channel is not necessarily the most trusted.

Figure 3

Level of trust in different media (National, 2023)

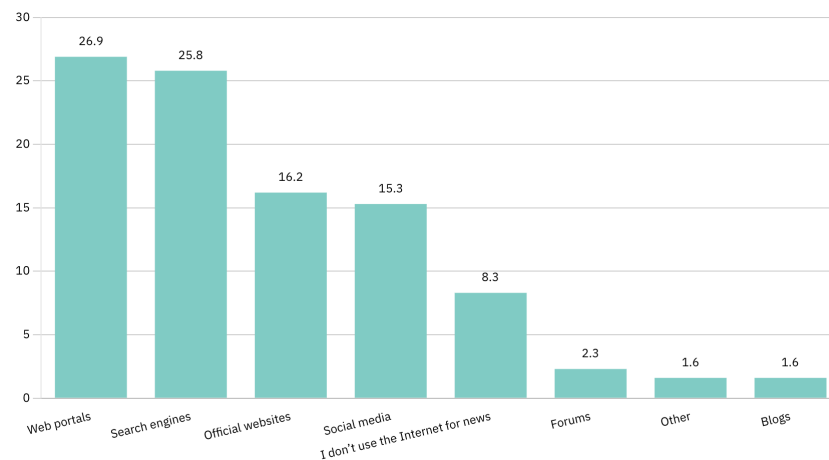


Source: author's own development

When analysing internet-specific habits, the most commonly used channels are web portals (26.9%), search engines (25.8%), and official websites (16.2%), followed by social media (15.3%). Forums and blogs are marginal. These findings highlight the dominance of search and portal ecosystems as gateways to information.

Figure 4

Channels used to get information (National, 2023)



Source: author's own development

Demographic analysis reveals age-based segmentation: respondents aged 16–29 rely almost exclusively on the Internet (>90%), while those aged 60–64 prefer television (35%) and radio (34%). Regionally, Zagreb and Istria exhibit the highest digital engagement (over 80%), whereas Slavonia and Lika show a stronger dependence on television due to limited digital infrastructure. These demographic differences indicate that a one-size-fits-all communication strategy is insufficient. Effective crisis messaging must combine online and traditional channels to ensure equitable access to information across age and regional divides. The dominance of digital channels brings both opportunities and vulnerabilities. On one hand, online media enable rapid information dissemination and interactive feedback loops; on the other hand, they amplify the spread of misinformation. According to Begović and Labaš (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how fake news can erode institutional trust, even when information is abundant. In the Croatian context, trust fragmentation suggests that institutional credibility must be reinforced through transparency and consistency across multiple channels. Official websites should serve as the primary sources of verified information, while television should act as the main amplifier for nationwide coverage. Moreover, cross-referencing data across platforms can help mitigate the effects of misinformation and reinforce the legitimacy of the message. International comparisons show similar patterns. Eurobarometer (2022) reports that across the EU, 67% of citizens use the Internet as their primary source of news, but only 26% find it trustworthy. This parallel trend situates Croatia within broader European media trust dynamics, emphasising the need for strategic alignment with EU-level communication standards.

Practical Implications for Crisis Communication

Based on these results, several recommendations emerge for policymakers and crisis communication practitioners:

- I. Establish a centralised digital hub that aggregates all verified information, is optimised for search engines, and is linked to institutional social media.
- II. Utilise television for urgent updates and for audiences with lower digital literacy levels.
- III. Ensure message synchronisation across platforms to prevent confusion and ensure consistency.
- IV. Promote media literacy programs that help citizens distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources.
- V. Monitor misinformation using social listening tools and rapidly correct false narratives.

Limitations and Future Research

This analysis relies on self-reported data, which may be influenced by recall bias. Furthermore, the study focuses on national-level aggregates, limiting insights into micro-regional variations. Future research should utilise time-series data to track changes in media trust and investigate the causal relationship between crisis severity and information-seeking behaviour.

Conclusion

The 2023 Croatian data confirm a media landscape dominated by the Internet but shadowed by distrust. For crisis communication to be effective, strategies must prioritise not only speed but also credibility. The combination of digital immediacy and traditional broadcast reliability remains the most resilient framework for reaching diverse audiences. By understanding demographic and regional nuances, institutions can develop crisis communication systems that are inclusive, transparent, and adaptable to the evolving media landscape.

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