

Mismanagement, mistrust and missed opportunities: a study of the 2004 tsunami and Swedish political communication

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It was early morning on 26 December 2004 when an underwater earthquake off the coast of Sumatra created a major tsunami, killing several hundred thousand people. This was one of the world's most devastating natural disasters ever.

Besides those directly hit by the tsunami, one of the most severely affected countries was Sweden, since more than 20,000 Swedish tourists were in the region at the time. As of today, the official number of identified dead or missing Swedes is 543. Thus, the disaster rapidly became a major news event in the Swedish media. However, the response from Swedish politicians and governmental authorities was rather slow. Consequently, the government was strongly criticized in the media only a couple of days after the tsunami struck.

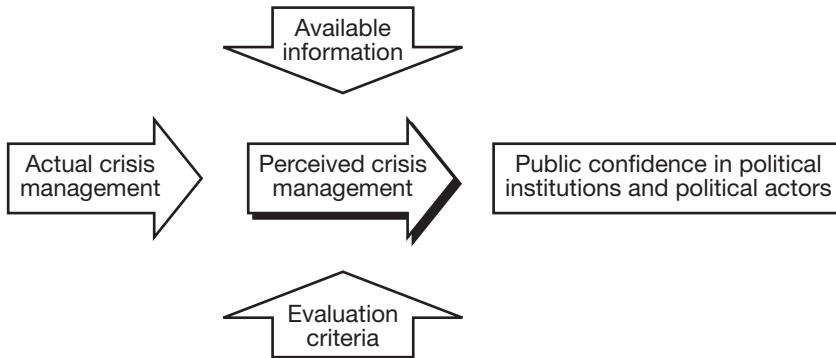
Against this backdrop, the objective of this article is to study the Swedish case with regard to the crisis management of the 2004 tsunami disaster, focusing on the public's perceptions of the media, the government and political leadership, and how it affected confidence in political institutions and leaders.

Crisis management and political confidence

During recent decades, political trust has declined in a range of modern democracies (Dalton, 1999; Klingemann, 1999). This is especially evident with regard to trust in political institutions and politicians (Klingemann, 1999; Listhaug, 1998; Listhaug and Wiberg, 1998), and Sweden is no exception (Holmberg, 1999). However, whereas some perceive this as troublesome, others perceive it as less important as long as there is strong support for the political community and the principles of the regime (Norris, 1999). Nevertheless, it does constitute a problem for those experiencing declining trust, because a continued level of support is essential with regard to their ability to reach their objectives.

Unravelling the causes behind low or declining confidence in political institutions and actors is by no means an easy task. Within the context of crisis

FIGURE 1
Explaining political confidence in crisis situations



management and this study, however, it is essential to recognize the importance of the *perceived performance* of political institutions and political actors, which follows from the combination of the evaluation criteria used and the available information (cf. Putnam et al., 2000). If the information people receive with regard to the handling of a particular crisis is critical, and people expect the institutions and political leaders to be able to manage a crisis 'better' than available information indicates that they have done, then declining confidence is the likely result (Figure 1).

Thus, what ultimately matters in the context of how political confidence is affected by crises is the *perceived crisis management*.

Perceived crisis management and the importance of the media

The importance of available information for people's perceptions of the management of a crisis points towards the crucial role of the news media. As noted by Graber: 'During crises, the public depends almost totally on the media for news and for vital messages from public and private authorities' (2005: 129).

In such situations, a complex interaction between the supply of, and the demand for information occurs. If the event constitutes or is perceived as a major crisis, then there is an almost insatiable demand for almost any information related to the event. The media both responds to and fuels these demands by interrupting their regular programming, rushing to the scene and reporting as extensively as possible, with the result that almost everything that is or can be covered in relation to the crisis becomes newsworthy (Nord and Strömbäck, 2005).

With regard to the tsunami, the crisis was undoubtedly real, but, in other cases, the news media might cover a particular event as though it constitutes a crisis not because of severe real-world consequences, but because it creates increased audience interest. This is not only because crises provide drama and excitement. More fundamentally, it is because a crisis, no matter whether it is objective or subjective, 'creates an information void' (Coombs, 1999: 115), and those will always be filled somehow and by someone.

From the perspective of crisis management, it is therefore essential that crisis managers respond as quickly as possible. If they do not manage to fill the information void, it will be filled with information provided by others, which might

prove to be critical and may be factually incorrect. Moreover, even if the media coverage tends to be chaotic in the initial stages, there is typically only a brief time-span before particular media frames start to evolve.

The media framing of a crisis is particularly important, since research shows that media frames can be highly influential with regard to people's opinions and attitudes (Iyengar, 1991). By selecting some aspects or some perspectives, news frames 'encourage particular trains of thought about political phenomena and lead audience members to arrive at more or less predictable conclusions' (Price et al., 1997: 483).

This process might be particularly consequential in political processes, as frames tend to promote particular 'problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (Entman, 1993: 52). If crisis managers respond quickly and forcefully, they can manage to fill the information void and shape the news framing of the event in such a way that it emphasizes their strength as leaders. If, however, they are slow to respond, or do so in such a way that it is deemed to be inappropriate or insufficient by the media, they may find themselves depicted as part of the problem rather than the solution.

Crisis response strategies

When a major disaster calling for crisis management occurs, it has the potential to both disrupt normal operations and affect the reputation of those charged with some responsibility for managing the crisis (Coombs, 2002). The first step in managing the crisis is therefore to define the character of the crisis.

According to Coombs (1999: 114–21), the initial response should be quick; the messages should be consistent; the organization should be characterized by openness and it should provide instructions and information. Additionally, it should express sympathy to those who have suffered physically, mentally or financially. Silence is never a recommended response, especially not when political and governmental institutions and actors are involved, because it is to them that the public turns in times of crisis and because silence reflects uncertainty and passivity (Coombs, 1999: 115).

Silence might also be taken to indicate that the organization has not recognized that an event indeed constitutes a crisis involving the organization. In such a situation, silence might turn a natural disaster into a full-blown crisis with political ramifications. That is, the lack of crisis recognition and crisis management, as manifested by silence and inaction, might turn the natural disaster into a political crisis.

If and when that happens, several different crisis communication (Coombs, 1999) or image restoration (Benoit, 1997; Benoit and Czerwinski, 1997) strategies have been identified. Efforts to evade responsibility include claiming that a lack of information or lack of control is to blame for the (in)action. The accused can also claim that the offensive (in)action occurred by accident. Furthermore, the (in)action that has offended people can be explained in terms of good intentions (Benoit and Czerwinski, 1997: 40–2). The accused can furthermore try to shift the blame onto others, or try to reduce the offensiveness of the (in)action (Benoit and Czerwinski, 1997).

It is of fundamental importance to recognize, no matter what strategies or tactics are used, that 'Perceptions are more important than reality' (Benoit, 1997: 178). These perceptions are to be found, first, among journalists and those responsible for the news coverage of the event, and only second by the public. If an organization

fails to convince the news media to incorporate their response strategies in the framing of the event, it will also fail to convince the public.

Accordingly, by being proactive and providing the news media with the information they are asking for, organizations can fill the information void and shape the framing of the news. It might also be a successful strategy to 'steal the thunder' by providing negative information that has, as yet, not been asked for by the news media but is likely to become public sooner or later (cf. Arpan and Pompper, 2003; Arpan and Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Dolnik et al., 2003; Shenkar and Yuchetman-Yaar, 1997).

Objective and research questions

The objective of this article is to study the Swedish case with regard to the crisis management of the 2004 tsunami disaster. More specifically, we ask three research questions:

RQ1: How did the Swedish public perceive the crisis management of the government after the tsunami disaster?

RQ2: How did the Swedish public perceive the media's performance after the tsunami disaster?

RQ3: How can the Swedish public's perceptions of government and the media after the tsunami disaster be explained?

Methodology

First, this study builds upon a telephone survey carried out during 8–23 February 2005. The survey includes 1001 citizens between the ages of 18 and 74, randomly selected from a national population register (PAR), and was carried out in cooperation with the Swedish Emergency Management Agency. The response rate was 90 percent, and the final sample reflects the population with regard to geography and gender, while the highly educated are somewhat over-represented.

Second, this study also builds upon a focus group study, totalling nine focus groups and 44 individuals. The focus group discussions were held in March 2005, in three cities: Stockholm, Gothenburg and Sundsvall. Each focus group interview lasted for approximately two hours, and the focus was on the research questions explained above.

Setting the stage: a brief description of the initial stage of the crisis

The first Swedish media reports concerning the tsunami arrived at 03.35 on 26 December 2004, when the news agency TT sent out a newflash. The first news report in the national radio was broadcast at 04.00. At 11.48 the first special TV news broadcast was aired, and then the reporting continued throughout the entire day. It soon became clear that thousands of Swedes were on vacation in Thailand,

and at 14.50, the news agency TT reported that at least one Swede had been killed by the tsunami.

At this initial stage of the crises, the media interrupted their regular scheduling in order to bring news updates as frequently as possible. All major news organizations attempted to move their reporters to the region where the tsunami had struck, particularly to Thailand where the majority of the Swedes were located. Despite this happening during the Christmas holiday period, most media organizations managed to focus on the evolving news event (Andersson Odén et al., 2005).

However, there was no reaction from the political leadership, and the only governmental official who appeared at the scene was the Swedish ambassador in Thailand. Instead, the most important source of information became a spokeswoman from one of the leading travel agencies.

The first press conference with the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister was not held until Monday 27 December, more than 24 hours after the crisis had begun. It took two more days before the first rescue teams were sent to Thailand, and yet another day until the Foreign Minister visited Thailand. Already, by this time, the government was being criticized for not responding quickly enough, for its failure to help the survivors and for the difficulties encountered by people attempting to obtain information from the Foreign Ministry.

On 13 January, the Swedish government set up an independent commission – the Swedish Tsunami Commission (STC) – to examine how the Government had acted in response to the tsunami. The final report from this commission was presented in December 2005 and it was highly critical. For example, the report states that: ‘Government offices did not have an efficient organization for handling serious crises’; the handling was characterized by a ‘lack of emergency organisation and leadership at executive level’, and ‘Disaster medical planning was inadequate for assessing the situation on the spot and initial medical efforts’ (SOU, 2005: 104: 509–11).

Accordingly, the actual crisis response during the initial stage could be characterized as ‘too little, too late and too uncoordinated’. Criticism of the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister was further fuelled by the fact that the latter went to the theatre on Sunday evening, thus symbolizing a lack of empathy and engagement. In addition, neither high-level officials nor politicians immediately cancelled their Christmas holiday to respond to the crisis. Criticism was further fuelled when the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister attempted to shift the blame for the slow response to lower-level governmental officials (Grandien et al., 2005). However, this attempt to evade responsibility did not succeed, as this study will show.

Results

Available information

The 2004 tsunami disaster struck on a Sunday in the middle of the Christmas holiday, when most people were at home celebrating with friends or families. Thus, people in general had both the time and the opportunity to follow the news. They were also almost certainly interested in the breaking news.

As is often the case when breaking news occurs, people turn their attention to the media, which offers the most rapid updates: TV, radio and, increasingly, the internet. Not surprisingly, given the overall importance of the media for the dissemination of information in modern democracies, the results confirmed

TABLE 1
News consumption concerning the 2004 tsunami disaster (%)

Media	Very often	Fairly often	Not so often	Not at all	Total
Television	57	37	5	1	100
Local press	27	32	17	24	100
Radio	15	32	35	18	100
Tabloids	17	24	26	33	100
Internet	9	15	17	59	100
National dailies	11	12	11	66	100

The question was: 'To what extent have you followed the news regarding the tsunami in the following media?'

the view that most people mainly received information concerning the tsunami from the media (Table 1).

TV was obviously the most important media for obtaining information about the tsunami disaster, followed by the local press and radio. During the initial stages, however, TV, radio and the internet might have been even more important than indicated by the results above. According to all the focus groups, when people first heard the news, they turned to these media for rapid updates.

When there is less breaking news, people in general become more interested in in-depth and follow-up reporting, and for this, they increasingly turn to newspapers. In this case the internet was also important, especially for those who wanted specific information relating, for example, to particular places such as hotels in the disaster areas or to what was being done for those who had survived and wanted to return home to Sweden. Generally speaking, no matter which medium people preferred, the survey shows that the public had confidence in how the media covered the tsunami. When asked 'How much confidence do you have in the way the media covered the tsunami', 78 percent said they had a lot, or quite a lot of confidence.

Evaluation criteria

When people evaluate how institutions, organizations or actors behave, use is always made of evaluation criteria. However, more often than not, they tend to be rather subconscious. It is when expectations are not fulfilled and people have to reflect on why they feel frustration or disappointment that their evaluation criteria become more explicit.

In the case of the tsunami, it is surely relevant to consider whether the Swedish public really expected inspiring political leadership and a government able to act even in such a serious crisis. Low political trust indicates low expectations and a sceptical public. On the other hand, political wisdom suggests that both ordinary people and the media usually tend to rally round their political leaders in difficult times, in spite of everyday criticism (Brewer et al., 2003). To some extent, people in Sweden also appeared to expect political leaders to be decisive when urgent situations require it.

The politicians at the top have the responsibility. The Foreign Ministry and the Government failed to meet the expectations. They acted too slowly and could not help the affected people.

This comment reveals that rapid response was part of the evaluation criteria people used when judging management of the crisis. However, even allowing for the fact that political confidence in Sweden has been decreasing over the last few decades (Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2004), scepticism rather than cynicism seemed to characterize the focus groups' general attitudes towards politicians.

We have elected the politicians, maybe they should have acted in other ways, but we have elected them. And I think the majority of them are doing their best.

However, the focus groups indicate that people do differentiate between politicians in general and specific politicians. Even though many participants expressed some degree of trust in politicians in general, they were critical of how particular politicians acted when handling the tsunami. In this particular case, people seemed to be more critical towards the government, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister, than towards other governmental institutions and other politicians. To several participants, the lack of a rapid response was symptomatic of a larger problem – that the current Prime Minister has formed a centralized power base, in which lower-level ministers and officials are afraid to be critical, or to deliver bad news.

I have not met the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister in person, but to me they appear to be two personalities who encourage cautiousness and fear in their political environment. When people don't dare to take initiatives without checking with everyone else, then the situation becomes dangerous.

Several similar statements were made in the focus groups, even though others maintained that politicians are hard-working people who attempt to do their best. Thus, expectations with regard to the political institutions and politicians during the tsunami disaster differed somewhat. Perhaps the explanation has to do with differing standards for different situations. When there is 'business as usual', political mistrust and low public expectations dominate, but in a perceived crisis people demand more effective governance and crisis management. Accordingly, evaluation criteria change and expectations spiral upwards.

Perceived crisis management

When attempting to understand why citizens feel the way they do about their government, it is important to note that their subjective appraisal of governmental performance is what ultimately matters. Hence, perceptions are more important than reality with regard to how public confidence is affected. In the case of the tsunami crisis management, these perceptions led people to think that there were very or fairly strong reasons to be critical (Table 2).

The participants in the focus groups also believed that there were strong reasons to be critical, particularly with regard to leading politicians. They were perceived as having acted too slowly and as not having realized the magnitude of the disaster. The participants also believed that leading politicians and governmental agencies failed to give accurate information about what was happening.

TABLE 2
Public perception of the Swedish management of the tsunami disaster (%)

	Very strong reasons	Fairly strong reasons	Not particularly strong reasons	No reasons	Sum
To what extent do you think there are reasons to be critical with regard to how Swedish authorities and organizations managed the tsunami disaster?	20	51	26	4	101

It is remarkable how you can be a Foreign Minister without watching foreign news on television during Christmas. If she had followed the news she would have realized the magnitude of the disaster much earlier.

Considering that 78 percent of the respondents in the survey expressed very or fairly strong confidence in the media coverage of the tsunami, whereas 71 percent thought there were very or fairly strong reasons to be critical of Swedish management of the disaster, it seems that when the media were critical of the authorities, and the authorities tried to shift the blame or to defend themselves, people chose to believe the media reports.

Political confidence

Political confidence can be judged to be the product of the perceived crisis management, the available information and the evaluation criteria decided upon by the public. During the tsunami disaster, public confidence was affected by the perception of unsuccessful governmental actions. This was, in turn, reinforced by media coverage that depicted crisis management that did not meet the evaluation criteria used by people with regard to the different organizations and authorities. This is evident from the survey responses to the question: 'How much confidence do you have in the following governmental agencies, organizations and individuals management of the tsunami disaster?' (Table 3).

These results suggest that the crisis management of the tsunami created both winners and losers in the court of public opinion. For example, the public expressed high confidence in how aid organizations and the travel agencies managed the crisis. On the other hand, the political agencies and actors were not particularly trusted over their management of the tsunami disaster.

Similar opinions were prevalent in the focus groups, which also displayed generally low confidence in political actors and authorities. As the evidence in Table 3 suggests, the two main players in the trust game were the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister. However, whereas the majority of the criticism in the survey is directed towards the Foreign Minister, the Prime Minister received more criticism from the focus groups.

TABLE 3
Swedish public confidence in the crisis management of the tsunami disaster of different governmental agencies, organizations and individuals (%)

	Very high	Fairly high	Fairly low	Very low	Total
Aid organizations	45	52	3	1	101
Swedish health service	35	58	6	1	100
Swedish Rescue Services Agency	34	58	7	1	100
Travel agencies	45	46	7	2	100
Swedish Lutheran Church	24	61	10	5	100
Swedish King	27	52	15	6	100
Prime Minister	3	34	42	21	100
Government	2	31	48	19	100
Foreign Ministry	2	24	46	28	100
Foreign Minister	1	18	39	42	100

I think the Prime Minister has handled this poorly. He is blaming other members of his cabinet and some officials on the Foreign Ministry. Sweden appears to be a very centralized country with a very centralized political power.

This quote indicates that the attempt by the Prime Minister to shift the blame onto others seems to have created a backlash. Instead of shielding him from criticism, it exacerbated it. However, both the survey data and the focus group discussions indicate that general political trust in Sweden has not declined because of the tsunami. When asked the question ‘Generally speaking, how much confidence do you have in Swedish politicians?’, 32 percent responded that they had a lot or quite a lot of confidence. This result is similar to those of other surveys carried out before the tsunami disaster (cf. Holmberg and Weibull, 2005). Thus, the lack of trust appears to be specific, rather than general.

Perceptions of the media and government

On the whole, existing valuation patterns and attitudes have been upheld in spite of the tsunami disaster. The series of events did not provide any surprises that would upset this pattern. However, as can be noted from Table 3, there were opportunities for unexpected players, such as the travel agencies, to step into the limelight and take advantage of the confidence gaps that opened up during the disaster.

According to the general public, the media behaved in a generally trust-inspiring manner. There was a widespread perception in the focus groups that most journalists acted in a professional manner, despite the fact that working conditions were extremely difficult. Systematic and ethical violations in the media were perceived as rare.

To conclude, the public described a Swedish government that was too slow to act and too disorientated during the first dramatic days. At the same time, the media probably benefited from the clumsiness of the political system. Journalists were considered to be acting as professionals in comparison to leading politicians, who were not. Journalists delivered their stories. Politicians did not arrive at the correct decisions.

Discussion

This study confirms something of a status quo situation. Political confidence was low before the disaster and the government did not succeed in improving the figures by their management of the event. There was no rallying around the flag and no general public support behind the political leadership. Instead, there was widespread public criticism of the government, and particularly of the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister.

Unravelling why political confidence has varied in different crisis scenarios is a complex task. This article discusses a model that focuses on public perceptions of crises management. It is assumed that these perceptions are based on the interdependent influences of the actual crisis management, the available information and the public evaluation criteria. Thus, changes in political confidence might be due to a change in any or all of these variables.

In this case, the government was not particularly successful in its crisis management. The crisis response strategies were totally insufficient. First, the government remained silent for far too long. The governmental response to what had actually happened was very slow and inconsistent from the very beginning. Furthermore, official information capacities were poorly developed during the most urgent phases, immediately after the disaster. By not acting appropriately, the government contributed to the diffusion of further uncertainty and passivity among its departments and among the authorities.

However, the perceived crisis management is probably much more important in explaining political confidence than the actual crisis management itself. Thus, it is relevant to analyse both the information flows and the existing standards for public evaluation of political actors during the tsunami disaster.

News reporting of the event was extensive (Andersson Odén et al., 2005) and perceived as professional. Instant information was available from websites and text-TV. The reports quickly confirmed the magnitude of the disaster and the fact that many Swedes were probably among the victims. In contrast to the official information flows during the first days, the news media appeared to deliver consistent and accurate information. Thus, the public perceived that it was provided with a reasonably good overview of what had happened. This made it difficult for the government to claim that they had done everything in the most effective and relevant way.

The weak political confidence in this case can also be explained by the public's evaluation criteria. However, the criteria appear to be somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, political confidence in Sweden is low, which indicates low public expectations of politicians. On the other hand, this study indicates that people expected the government to act more rapidly and forcefully than it was perceived as having done, thus illustrating rather high expectations. As the government did not meet these expectations, the result was declining confidence.

Thus, it might be that people change their expectations with regard to the current political conditions. Even if expectations are generally low, this study indicates that citizens do have high expectations during a political crisis. Paradoxically, the low expectations with reference to decisive action for any normal situation appear to be transformed into high expectations in a crisis situation when the options for acting in an appropriate manner are generally more limited. Thus, many Swedes who usually have a low trust in government expected leading politicians to take initiatives and give the public accurate information as soon as possible. When this did not happen, other institutions in society filled the void and gained more confidence.

This case study of the tsunami disaster illustrates something of a worst-case crisis communication scenario for the Swedish government. Initially, the crisis response strategies failed. At the same time, a considerable amount of accurate information was available from the news media and the public expectations with regards to government action were considerably increased. Thus, all the different variables used in explaining political confidence were working to the disadvantage of the Swedish government. The end result was declining confidence in those who were perceived as being primarily responsible for the (mis)management of the tsunami disaster.

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