Crisis Communication and Public Trust: Comparative Study of Hawaii's False Alert and Nigeria's Insecurity Response

ABSTRACT

Effective crisis communication is a corner stone of public trust and state legitimacy during emergencies. This study interrogates the dynamics of crisis communication and its effect on public trust by undertaking a comparative analysis of two critical case studies: the 2018 Hawii false missile alert and the Nigerian government's communication response to ongoing insecurity crisis, particularly insurgency and banditry between 2015 and 2023. Both cases represent contrasting political, technological, and socio-cultural contexts but converge on the pivotal question of how public institutions manage crisis, disseminate information, and maintain credibility under pressure. The study is anchored on the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which emphasizes the importance of choosing the right communication strategies based on the nature of the crisis and the level of responsibility attributed to the organization. Through this theoretical lens, the research examines the crisis response mechanisms of both governments and how they shaped public perception and trust. Thus, the thematic foci of this study encompasses: Timeliness and Transparency of Communication-comparing the immediate responses and rectification efforts following the crisis in both region; Government Accountability and Institutional Credibility-examining public trust levels in the aftermath of crisis communication failures or successes; and Role of Media and Digital Platforms in Crisis Amplification or Mitigation-assessing the influence of traditional and social media in shaping crisis narratives an citizen reactions. This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study methodology, drawing from media reports, official government statements, public opinion surveys, and academic literature because it will contribute to academic discourse by bridging Global North-South experiences in crisis communication, highlighting structural, cultural, and institutional determinants that shape public trust. In conclusion, the study reveals that while the Hawaiian case showcased a rapid correction and clear chain of accountability that helped restore some public trust, the Nigerian context remains marred by fragmented communication strategies, politicization of insecurity, and a widening trust deficit.

Keywords: *Crisis Communication, Public Trust, Misinformation, Hawaii, Nigeria, (SCCT).*

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I. Introduction

Crisis communication is a pivotal aspect of organizational and governmental responses during emergencies, serving as a critical tool to manage public perception, alleviate panic, and maintain trust in institutions. The effectiveness of crisis communication can often determine the degree of public confidence in the entities involved, especially during events that threaten public safety. According to

Roccas & Schwartz (2007) public trust is the belief of competence, integrity, and reliability people holds about an organization and institutions, particularly fragile moments of crisis. How institutions and organizations manage communication in the face of crisis has profound implication for societal resilience, recovery, and the subsequent long-term relationship between governments and their citizens (Boin & Hart, 2003).

This research seeks to explore the role of crisis communication in shaping public trust by comparing two high-profile crises in different geopolitical contexts: Hawaii's false missile alert in 2018 and Nigeria's ongoing insecurity challenges, particularly in relation to insurgency and armed conflict. Both events, although distinct in nature and scope, highlight the importance of effective communication in crisis management, as well as the critical role that communication plays in maintaining public trust in governmental bodies.

Hawaii's false missile alert, which occurred on the13th day of January, 2018, was a false alarm sent by the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency (HI-EMA) stating that a ballistic missile threat was imminent. This alert, which caused widespread panic and confusion among residents, was later revealed to be the result of human error, despite the gravity of its content. The event sparked immediate public outcry, with citizens expressing frustration over the lack of proper safeguards in place to prevent such an incident. Despite the clear communication breakdown, Hawaii's response to the crisis-particularly the subsequent apology and the investigations into the cause-offered a case study on the role of governmental transparency and accountability in restoring public trust.

In contrast, Nigeria's insecurity crisis has been ongoing for decades of years, primarily characterized by insurgencies, kidnappings, and violence, particularly from extremist groups like Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). While the insecurity crisis is multifaceted and long-lasting, Nigeria's responses-both in terms of security efforts and communication-have been widely criticized for being insufficient and opaque (Sambo & Ebeku, 2017; Udeh & Uzodimma, 2020). The government's communication efforts regarding the insecurity challenges have often been seen as inconsistent, poorly coordinated, and untrustworthy, contributing to an erosion of public confidence in the state's ability to provide security. In particular, the handling of major incidents, such as the Chibok School girl's abduction and the mass kidnappings in Northern Nigeria, has attracted significant media attention and public security, making the question of public trust even more pertinent.

Accordingly, this research aims to conduct a comparative study of these two events to explore how crisis communication strategies impact public trust in the respective governments involved. By examining both the Hawaii missile alert incident and Nigeria's insecurity response, the study will assess the nature and effectiveness of the crisis communication strategies employed the immediate and long-term consequences of these strategies on public trust, and the broader implications for crisis management in both local and global contexts.

Coombs (2007) have argued that effective communication during crises must address key issues of clarity, transparency, and empathy to maintain or restore public trust. For Pauchant & Mitroff (1992) communication failures often compound the severity of a crisis, as the public's ability to cope with the crisis is heavily dependent on the information they receive. Therefore, this study will underpin its investigate on the theoretical framework of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and adopt a practical applications of principles within the two cases under study, asking whether transparency, clarity, and responsiveness were prioritized in both Hawaii's and Nigeria's crisis management efforts.

The comparison of these two cases offers significant insight into the dynamics of crisis communication in two very different contexts: one, an isolated, developed island state within the United States, and the other, a developing nation grappling with complex national security issues. By addressing the comparative aspects of these events, the study contributes to the existing body of literature on crisis communication by shedding light on the ways in which different political, social, and cultural contexts can influence the public's trust in governmental communication during times of crisis. Additionally, the research draws on the work of crisis management scholars and communication experts to frame the analysis of the role of media, government transparency, and citizen responses. In doing so, this research will provide a more nuanced understanding of the

complex relationship between crisis communication and public trust in both developed and developing countries.

II.   Theoretical Framework

The Theoretical framework of this study is primarily anchored in the Situational Crisis Communication (SCCT), developed by William L. Coombs (2007), which provides a structured approach for understanding and evaluating crisis communication strategies based on the nature and severity of the crisis. The theory posits that the type and degree of crisis influence how organizations should respond in order to protect their reputation and maintain or restore public trust. This theory emphasizes that different types of crises require different communication strategies, and that public perception is shaped by both the crisis itself and the way in which it is managed. The application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory to the cases of Hawaii's false missile alert and Nigeria's insecurity response will provide a robust framework for analyzing how these events were handled and the resultant effects on public trust.

Thus, the SCCT theory is based on the premise that crisis communication efforts should be tailored to the specific circumstances of a crisis, and that the response strategy should take into account factors such as the level of crisis responsibility, the perceived crisis type, and the potential for reputational damage. Accordingly, Coombs (2007) posit that the key components of SCCT include:

Crisis Responsibility

According to him this refers to the degree to which the organization or government is seen as responsible for causing or exacerbating the crisis. A government or organization perceived as highly responsible for a crisis will face a higher level of reputational damage and trust erosion, necessitating a more intense and proactive communication response. The Hawaii false missile alert, although a result of human error, may be perceived as a failure of governmental oversight. On the other hand, Nigeria's insecurity response is often seen as a failure of leadership to provide security and maintain order, with consequences for public trust in the Nigerian government (Udeh & Uzodimma, 2020).

Crisis Type

For Coombs (2007) crisis is categorized into three main types, based on the organization's perceived responsibility:

Victim Crisis: According to him these crises only occur when the organization or government is seen as a victim, with minimal responsibility for the crisis. For instance, natural disasters or terrorist attacks are often considered victim crises.

Accidental Crises: These crises occur when the organization's actions unintentionally cause the crisis. Hawaii's false missile alert can be categorized as an accidental crisis, as it was triggered by human error, even though the consequences were significant.

Preventable Crises: These categories of crises occur when the organization or government is seen as being responsible due to negligence, incompetence, or lack of action. Nigeria's ongoing insecurity, particularly related to the government's delayed or inadequate response to insurgency can be classified as a preventable crisis, where the government is held accountable for not effectively addressing the causes or mitigating the consequences of the insecurity.

Response Strategies

Coombs (2007) outlines several response strategies based on the level of responsibility the organization holds for the crisis. These include:

Denial: The organization denies responsibility for the crisis. This strategy is appropriate when the organization is not responsible for the crisis. However, both Hawaii and Nigeria's governments did not adopt a pure denial strategy, as their roles in the crises were acknowledged, even if the degree o responsibility varied.

Diminishment: The organization attempts to reduce the perceived damage by minimizing the severity of the crisis or by offering an explanation o the events. Hawaii's response to the false missile alert involved attempting to reassure the public by acknowledging the mistake and assuring citizens that corrective measures would be implemented.

Rebuilding: This strategy is used when the organization acknowledges its responsibility for the crisis and works to rebuild trust by apologizing and offering compensation or corrective action. Hawaii's apology and subsequent changes to its emergency alert system are examples of rebuilding strategies.

Similarly, Nigeria's government response to its insecurity crisis, although often criticized, has included efforts to restore trust through official statements, security reforms, and international cooperation. Bolstering: This strategy involves highlighting positive aspects of the organization's image to offset the negative impact of the crisis. Both Hawaii and Nigeria attempted to demonstrate their commitment to improving security and communication systems, although the effectiveness of these efforts has varied. Reputation Repair: The Situational Crisis Communication Theory postulate that the overall goal of crisis communication is to protect the organization's reputation, especially public trust (Coombs, 2007). He posits that if this is done, the more effectively an organization will communicate its response, and the more likely it is to maintain or restore trust. Trust in governmental institutions, according to Boin & Hart (2003) is critical because citizens expect leaders to not only provide safety and security, but also to ensure transparency, accountability, and competence during crises. Thus, Hawaii and Nigeria's crisis communication efforts are assessed based on their effectiveness in repairing reputational damage and restoring public trust.

As emphasized earlier, the Hawaii's false missile alert is a case of an accidental crisis, where the government's responsibility for the event was perceived as unintentional but avoidable with more robust systems in place. According to this theory the government's response should have focused on rebuilding public trust by acknowledging the mistake, offering a clear explanation, and implementing corrective actions. Hawaii's government responded with an apology and took steps to implement more rigorous safeguards and training protocols to prevent a recurrence of such an incident. The clarity and transparency of the response were crucial in mitigating public panic and restoring confidence in the emergency management system. However, the effectiveness of Hawaii's response in restoring public trust can be assessed by examining how well the government communicated the nature of the error and the measures taken to prevent similar incidents.

In contrast, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory's application to Nigeria's insecurity crisis represents a preventable crisis, as the government's inability to address the root causes of insurgency and armed conflict has led to widespread public disillusionment (Udeh & Uzodimma, 2020). Thus, the response of the Nigerian government has been widely perceived as inadequate, with inconsistencies in communication further exacerbating the crisis. According to this theory (SCCT), Nigeria should employ rebuilding strategies such as acknowledging responsibility, apologizing to the public, and taking concrete actions to address the security situation. Coombs (2007) posit that the lack of consistent communication, as well as the perceived failure of leadership in adequately tackling the insecurity problem, has contributed to the erosion of public trust in the government's ability to manage the crisis. The government's failure to adequately communicate efforts to address the insurgency, compounded by issues of corruption and mismanagement, has made it difficult to regain the trust of the Nigerian populace.

Accordingly, by examining Hawaii's false missile alert and Nigeria's insecurity response through the lens of Situational Crisis Communication Theory underscores the importance of transparency, accountability, and timely action in crisis communication, which are crucial elements in both restoring and maintaining public trust during periods of crisis. Understanding how this theory apply to real-world cases will contribute to a deeper understanding of crisis communication dynamics in both developed and developing nations.

Timeliness and Transparency of Communication

Timeliness and transparency are two of the most critical factors influencing the effectiveness of crisis communication and the subsequent impact on public trust. In times of crisis, the speed at which information is communicated and the level of transparency with which the crisis is addressed can either mitigate or exacerbate public concern, shaping perceptions of institutional competence and credibility. Both Hawaii's false missile alert and Nigeria's response to insecurity highlight the profound implications that communication speed and clarity have on public trust, particularly when government actions or inactions are scrutinized by the public and media.

Timeliness refers to the speed with which information is delivered to the public during a crisis. In the context of crisis communication, quick and accurate information is crucial in preventing misinformation, reducing panic, and ensuring that the public has the necessary details to respond appropriately (Paunchant & Mitroff, 1992).

For Coombs (2007), timely responses are particularly important in victim and accidental crisis, where the public is more vulnerable to confusion and fear. Both Hawaii's false missile alert and Nigeria's insecurity crisis offer valuable insights into how timing can influence the effectiveness of crisis communication. Placing emphasize on time as a viable tool for influencing effectiveness in crisis communication, the false missile alert of January 13, 2018, in Hawaii is a classic example with the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency (HI-EMA), triggering a widespread panic among residents, were many of whom believed that a nuclear attack was imminent. However, the alert was only corrected after thirty-eight minutes from the time it was sent, but for that short duration it has left the public in a state of fear and uncertainty. Notwithstanding, the delay in rectifying the false alert was a critical factor in evaluating the timeliness of Hawaii's crisis communication.

Accordingly, Reynolds (2002) opined that during such crisis, especially when public safety is perceived to be at risk, providing accurate information within minutes is essential to avoid public hysteria because the delay in issuing a follow-up correction only deepened confusion with many residents questioning why they were left uninformed for nearly forty minutes. The absence of immediate clarification from authorities is likely to result in breakdown of trust such as the Hawaii's emergency management system, as citizens were not reassured promptly.

In contrast, effective timeliness in addressing the false alert is possible of mitigating crisis as quick response will be passed to the public of its error and reassuring the populace of government's safety measures. Delay in such crisis situation will ultimately compromise the public's perception of her government's ability to manage the crisis effectively, thus, leading to calls for greater accountability and system reforms (Renn, 2008).

The situation in Nigeria's northeastern region, particularly with the ongoing insurgency led by the Boko Haram and the rise of other armed groups like ISWAP, underscores the need for timely communication to build public trust during prolonged crisis. Nigeria's response to these crises has often criticized for being slow and inconsistent. The government has frequently been accused of not providing timely updates bout security developments, particularly in high-profile cases like the abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls in 2014. For Baker (2015) the lack of rapid and consistent communication from Nigerian authorities in the aftermath of such events allowed for the spread of rumors, misinformation, and public panic. In addition, delayed updates often led to a sense of abandonment among the public, eroding trust in the government's capacity to ensure public safety.

Timely communication, especially regarding troop movements, efforts to rescue kidnapped victims, and the progress of peace talks, could have helped to alleviate some of the anxiety felt by citizens. Heath (2006) argued that when authorities fail to act swiftly, they risk losing their credibility, which can cause long-term damage to public trust. In both Nigeria and Hawaii, timely communication was essential to counteracting misinformation and clarifying the actual nature of the crisis.

Transparency in crisis communication refers to the extent to which organizations or governments openly share accurate and comprehensive information about the crisis. Openness and honesty are key elements of effective crisis communication, as they help prevent misinformation and build trust in the government's ability to manage the situation. Coombs (2007) opined that transparency ensure that the public understands not only what has occurred but also the actions being taken to address the crisis. Hence, the lack of transparency can create a vacuum that allows for rumors, misinformation, and conspiracy theories to flourish, further damaging trust (Boin & Hart, 2003).

In the aftermath of the false missile alert, Hawaii's response was observed for both its timeliness and transparency. Although the government quickly admitted that the alert was a mistake, the initial response lacked transparency about the specific causes of the error. A public apology was issued, but citizens were left uncertain about the exact nature of the human error and why it had occurred in the first place (Hawaii Emergency Management Agency, 2018). This lack of clear, detailed information in the early hours following the crisis contributed to confusion, as people wondered how such a grave error could have occurred. In the words of Lundgren & McMakin (2013), transparency is critical in crisis situations, particularly when organizations are held responsible or public safety. Providing a transparent account of the incident, including clear details on the safeguards being implemented to prevent future errors, could have gone a long way in restoring public

confidence. The government did eventually release additional information, but the delayed response and lack of clarity in the initial moments weakened the overall transparency of their crisis communication.

Nigeria's government has similarly faced criticism for its lack of transparency regarding the ongoing insecurity in the country. One notable example is the Chibok schoolgirls kidnapping in 2014. In the wake of the abduction, the Nigerian government was slow to provide details about the number of girls involved, the status of the rescue efforts, and the exact role of various militant groups (Baker, 2015). At that point many parents and citizens accused the government of withholding information, which only fueled distrust. Transparency in communication, such as providing frequent and accurate updates on the status of kidnapped victims, the progress of military operations, and efforts to prevent future attacks, could have mitigated some of the public's frustrations and uncertainty. Boin & Hart (2003) stressed that during crisis, transparency must extend beyond just the facts; it also requires the government to communicate openly about its limitations and challenges, so that the public understands the complexity of the situation.

The timeliness and transparency of communication have a direct bearing on public trust. Trust in government institutions is fundamentally tied to the perception of their competence, honesty, and responsiveness. In both Hawaii and Nigeria, failures in timely and transparent communication have resulted in a deterioration of public trust. In Hawaii, for instance the public trust in emergency management was compromised by the lack of timely information and a clear explanation of the alert's cause. While, in Nigeria, the failure to communicate effectively about the insecurity crisis-through both delayed updates and a lack of transparency-has contributed to public skepticism and frustration with the government's ability to maintain security and address the root causes of violence.

As opined by Lundgren & McMakin (2013), crisis communication is not just about managing the flow of information, but about shaping perceptions of trustworthiness and credibility. Hitherto, both cases, the timely and transparent release of information could have played a pivotal role in maintaining or restoring public trust. Effective communication strategies, when conbined with proactive and honest messaging, help mitigate the risks of misinformation, reassure the public, and foster an environment of mutual respect between government agencies and the citizens they serve. The comparative analysis of Hawaii's false missile alert and Nigeria's insecurity response illustrates the importance of rapid, clear, and open communication. In both cases, delays in providing timely information and the lack of transparency undermined public trust in governmental institutions, exacerbating the crises. This highlights the need for governmental bodies to prioritize both the speed and transparency of their communication efforts to maintain public confidence and prevent long-term damage to institutional credibility.

Government Accountability and Institutional Credibility

The effectiveness of crisis communication is largely contingent upon government accountability and the credibility of state institutions. For this reason, exploring how institutional transparency, responsiveness, and historical performance affect public trust during moments of crisis, particularly in the context of the 2018 Hawaii ballistic missile false alert and Nigeria's response to persistent insecurity underscores government's responsibility and institutions credibility, reliability, and competence. As opined by Miller & Listhaug (1990); Bouckaert & Van de Walle (2003), government accountability refers to the mechanisms through which state actors are held responsible for their actions, while institutional credibility involves the public's perception of these institutions as reliable, competent, and honest.

In Hawaii, the erroneous missile alert on January 13, 2018, raised immediate concerns about the accountability of the Emergency Management Agency (HI-EMA) and the reliability of its protocols. The public's reaction was swift and critical, prompting investigations, official apologies, and a restructuring of emergency communication systems (Federal Communications Commission [FCC], 2018). Although trust was momentarily shaken, the government's transparent handling and immediate reforms helped to restore some degree of institutional credibility (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005).

Conversely, in Nigeria, widespread and recurrent insecurity-ranging from insurgency in the North-East to banditry and kidnapping in the North-West and Middle Belt-has exposed longstanding institutional weaknesses. Public trust in government responses is continually eroded by delayed communication, politicization of security issues, and lack of actionable intelligence dissemination (Ojebode et al., 2021; Adebayo, 2020). Unlike Hawaii, where one crisis triggered systemic reforms, Nigeria's recurring crises have not elicited significant changes in accountability mechanisms or communication frameworks, hitherto amplifying public skepticism and fear.

This comparative study underscores the importance of institutional credibility in building and sustaining public trust during emergencies. Effective crisis communication must be situated within a broader framework of responsible governance, timely information dissemination, and a demonstrable commitment to institutional reform. For Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, (2011) without accountability, even the well-crafted communication strategies risk being perceived as hollow or deceptive, especially in high-stakes situations involving public safety.

The Role of Media and Digital Platforms in Crisis Mitigation

In the digital age, media and digital platforms play an increasingly central role in crisis mitigation, serving as both channels for official communication and as arenas for public discourse. It examines how traditional and digital media influenced the mitigation of public panic and trust restoration. Thus, following the Hawaii ballistic missile false alert in 2018, compared to the role these platforms have played amid Nigeria's persistent insecurity crisis. The comparative analysis underscores how media infrastructure, government-media relations, and digital literacy shape the effectiveness of crisis communication in restoring public trust.

In Hawaii, the state's Emergency Management Agency (HI-EMA) utilized Twitter and SMS alerts as parts of its emergency protocol. Despite the initial failure in issuing a swift correction, digital platforms such as Twitter and online news outlets facilitated rapid dissemination of clarification and state responses, ultimately helping to calm public fears (Federal Communications Commission [FCC], 2018). Reynolds & Seeger (2005) opined that the media's ability to access and broadcast real-time government updates mitigated the psychological impact and helped re-establish some measure of credibility.

In contrast, Nigeria's media landscape is often challenged by censorship, inconsistent messaging, and the prevalence of misinformation, especially during crisis events like insurgent attacks, kidnappings, and communal violence. While social media platforms like Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook are heavily relied upon for real-time updates, they also function as conducts for panic-inducing rumors and unverified content (Ojebode et al, 2021).

According to Adebayo (2020) government agencies such as the Nigerian Army and the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) have occasionally used digital channels to engage the public, but delays, conflicting narrative, and poor media coordination have compromised their effectiveness in crisis mitigation. Moreover, Nigeria's repeated attempts to regulate or suspen digital platforms-such as the temporary Twitter ban in 2021-have further strained the relationship between the state and the public, weakening digital trust and reducing the efficacy of official crisis communication (Iwuoha & Aniche, 2022).

In comparison, Hawaii's experience demonstrates how effective collaboration between state authorities and digital media platforms can rapidly mitigate misinformation and restore calm. This reveals that while media and digital platforms are powerful tools for crisis mitigation, their success is dependent on proactive government engagement, trust in media sources, and the availability of timely, accurate information. For both contexts, the credibility of the message is inextricably linked to the perceived integrity of the message.

III.   Conclusion and Recommendations

This comparative study of Hawaii's 2018 missile false alert and Nigeria's multifaceted response to ongoing insecurity reveals stark differences in crisis communication strategies and their impacts on public trust. The Hawaiian incident, though marked by an initial lapse in verification and prompt response, was mitigated by a swift public apology, transparent correction measures, and procedural reforms. These actions underscored the importance of accountability and responsiveness in

restoring public confidence (FEMA, 2018; Omand, 2018). On the contrary, Nigeria's approach to insecurity-especially with regard to banditry, insurgency, and abductions-has often been marred by delayed governmental response, inconsistent communication, and a lack of transparency. These deficiencies have eroded public trust and contributed to growing civic disengagement (Adebayo & Olayinka, 2021).

This comparison highlights that public trust during crisis hinges not only on the accuracy of communication. While Hawaii provides a case of institutional learning and procedural reform after failure, Nigeria's case underscores the consequences o systemic communication breakdown and persistent governance deficits in crisis management.

Recommendations

In sum, public trust is the most valuable currency in times of crisis. Its restoration and maintenance require not just communicative competence, but also ethical governance, institutional transparency, and a deep commitment to citizen welfare. On the bases of this we recommend that:

Governments should prioritize clear and codified crisis communication protocols. Or Nigeria, it should include establishing of centralized and depoliticized communication agencies equipped with real-time information systems and public liaison officers.

Government as a matter of necessity must adopt a culture of openness and accountability. This is because quick acknowledgement of faults, as seen in Hawaii's response, is critical in sustaining public trust. Nigeria's communication strategy should incorporate verified data, avoid conflicting messages, and promote access to credible information.

Government should give attention in investing in modern crisis alert systems, training for emergency response teams, and leveraging digital platforms can enhance efficiency. Mobile alert systems, community radio, and digital messaging should be integrated into Nigeria's crisis communication framework.

Communication as a two-way thing, government should engage on regular public forums, citizen feedback mechanisms, and collaboration with civil society and local leaders can bridge the gap between government and citizens, thereby fostering a more resilient response framework.

We are of the opinion that policymakers in developing nations like ours in Nigeria should study international best practices in crisis communication, such as those instituted in Hawaii post-incident, to design context-appropriate reforms that ensure both message accuracy and trust-bulding.

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