



TELEVISION BROADCASTING AS A CATALYST FOR COMMUNITY RECOVERY: A STUDY ON FLOOD-AFFECTED AREAS IN MATARA DISTRICT (2016–2023)

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how public and private television broadcasters contributed to community recovery in the aftermath of recurrent floods in Sri Lanka's Matara District from 2016 to 2023. Recognizing the increasing significance of media in disaster contexts, the study focuses on the communicative functions of television in delivering life-saving information, emotional reassurance, and fostering social stability during post-disaster phases. The research problem centers on how television content can be made more effective and inclusive in addressing the needs of disaster-stricken populations. Employing a mixed-methods design, the study integrates qualitative interviews with key stakeholders, including media producers, government officials, community leaders, and NGO representatives, quantitative data from affected residents, and content analysis of disaster-related television programs. This methodological triangulation allows for a nuanced understanding of both media output and audience reception. The findings confirm that television played a critical role in providing timely updates, promoting collective resilience, and mobilizing support mechanisms. However, challenges such as limited accessibility, insufficient regional focus, and weak coordination with disaster management bodies were also identified. Anchored in established communication theories, the discussion emphasizes the need for more localized, culturally sensitive programming and stronger institutional linkages between broadcasters and emergency agencies. The study recommends the enhancement of local media infrastructure, training for broadcasters in crisis communication, and the creation of content that reflects the unique experiences and recovery needs of flood-affected communities.

KEYWORDS: Disaster broadcasting, Television, Social resilience, Community recovery, Flood communication

Introduction

Natural disasters are becoming increasingly frequent and intense due to global climate change, population growth, and urban development. In countries like Sri Lanka, floods have become a recurring and destructive force, leaving communities vulnerable and requiring long-term recovery efforts. In this context, television broadcasting has emerged as a crucial mechanism for disseminating timely information, promoting emotional reassurance, and supporting social cohesion during post-disaster recovery. This study explores the role of television broadcasting in facilitating community recovery in the flood-affected areas of Sri Lanka's Matara District from 2016 to 2023, a period marked by repeated climate-related calamities. The study engages a range of stakeholders, including television producers, local government disaster officers, community representatives, and NGOs, to capture diverse perspectives on how media supports recovery processes.

Sri Lanka, being an island nation with a tropical climate, is especially vulnerable to monsoonal flooding. The Matara District, located in the Southern Province, has faced numerous flood events in the past decade, including the devastating floods of 2016, 2017, and 2021. These events displaced thousands, caused fatalities, disrupted livelihoods, and damaged infrastructure. In the wake of these disasters, recovery has required more than just logistical or infrastructural rebuilding; it has also demanded emotional support, social cohesion, and timely information—areas where media can play a significant role.

Television remains one of the most accessible and influential media platforms in Sri Lanka. Despite the rise of digital and mobile media, television continues to enjoy broad reach and trust among the public, especially in rural and semi-urban areas where internet access may be intermittent or limited. Unlike print or online platforms, television combines audio and visual storytelling in a way that is immediate, engaging, and often persuasive. This makes it an ideal tool for conveying disaster-related messages, mobilizing aid, supporting psychosocial recovery, and shaping public perceptions in post-crisis contexts. John W. Cheng (2016), in his research related to the 2011 East Japan Earthquake, demonstrated that television media outperformed social media in effectively disseminating information and building public trust during disasters. Accordingly, this study focuses on television media rather than digital platforms, acknowledging its continued dominance and reliability in crisis communication.

Globally, the significance of media in disaster contexts has been widely recognized. Theories such as Uses and Gratifications, Agenda-Setting, and Framing have been applied to understand how media content affects public behavior, perception, and resilience. Media scholars have emphasized that during disasters, people turn to television not just for information, but also for reassurance, emotional validation, and guidance on how to cope. In Sri Lanka, however, there has been limited scholarly exploration into the role of television broadcasting specifically in community recovery processes after natural disasters. Most existing studies have focused on the immediate response phase or on institutional disaster management strategies, leaving a significant gap in understanding the long-term communicative functions of television in disaster recovery.

The central research problem addressed in this study is how television content can be made more effective and inclusive in addressing the recovery needs of flood-affected communities. More specifically, the research investigates the extent to which television broadcasting has facilitated emotional reassurance, community mobilization, social stability, and resilience among residents of the Matara District following flood events between 2016 and 2023. Furthermore, the study examines the structural and operational challenges faced by broadcasters, such as limited regional focus, insufficient coordination with disaster management authorities, and accessibility barriers for marginalized groups.

To address these questions, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach that includes qualitative interviews with key stakeholders—such as media producers, local government officials, and disaster relief workers—as well as quantitative surveys of affected residents. In addition, content analysis of selected television programs aired during and after flood events is conducted to assess the thematic focus, narrative strategies, and cultural relevance of disaster-related coverage. This methodological triangulation allows for a comprehensive understanding of both media production and reception in the context of disaster recovery.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform more responsive and inclusive media practices in disaster-prone settings. By examining the case of Matara District, the study provides empirical insights into how television can be harnessed as a catalyst for recovery, rather than being confined to its traditional role as a source of information. It highlights the need for localized programming that resonates with the cultural and emotional realities of affected communities. It also underscores the importance of strengthening partnerships between media institutions and disaster management bodies to ensure accurate, timely, and useful information dissemination during and after crises.

Furthermore, the study contributes to broader theoretical debates in media and communication studies by extending the application of communication theories to post-disaster contexts in the Global South. It builds on the idea that media is not merely a passive conveyor of messages, but an active participant in shaping social responses to crisis. In this sense, television becomes a site of meaning-making, where narratives of loss, hope, resilience, and recovery are constructed, contested, and circulated.

From a policy perspective, the findings of this study can aid in the development of guidelines for crisis communication in the broadcasting sector. Training programs for television journalists and producers can be designed to incorporate principles of ethical reporting, trauma sensitivity, and audience engagement. Investments in local media infrastructure, especially in disaster-prone districts like Matara, can ensure that vulnerable populations are not left out of critical recovery narratives. Most importantly, by foregrounding the voices of flood-affected residents, this study advocates for a participatory model of media engagement that treats communities not as passive recipients of aid and information, but as active agents of their own recovery.

In summary, this introduction sets the stage for a research inquiry into the multifaceted role of television broadcasting in community recovery following natural disasters. By focusing on the Matara District of Sri Lanka over a seven-year period marked by repeated flooding, the study aims to illuminate both the possibilities and limitations of television as a tool for post-disaster resilience. Through an integrated methodology and a commitment to both academic rigor and social relevance, the research aspires to contribute meaningfully to the fields of disaster communication, media studies, and community development.

Literature Review

Media in Disaster Risk Reduction and Recovery

In recent decades, the role of media in disaster risk reduction (DRR) and post-disaster recovery has received growing attention from scholars, policymakers, and humanitarian actors. Media is widely recognized not only as a conduit of information during disasters but also as an essential actor in shaping social behavior, public perception, and recovery trajectories. According to the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR, 2022), effective communication is critical in all stages of disaster management—from preparedness to response and recovery. Media plays a pivotal role in early warning dissemination, mobilizing relief efforts, and educating the public about risk mitigation strategies.

Empirical studies have shown that media coverage influences both immediate behavioral responses and long-term community resilience. For instance, during the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, local and international media were instrumental in mobilizing relief, reporting casualties, and helping families reunite (Pantti et al., 2012). However, scholars caution against the over-reliance on media merely as a transmission tool, emphasizing that its function in DRR and recovery is complex, contested, and culturally specific. Moreover, media's impact can vary significantly depending on access, trust, language, and representation of affected communities (Houston et al., 2012).

In the Sri Lankan context, media has historically played a critical role in covering disasters—from floods and landslides to civil conflict. However, its function in the recovery phase, especially in providing psychosocial support and fostering community resilience, has not been sufficiently examined. Most attention remains focused on media's role in immediate crisis response, leaving gaps in understanding how post-disaster communication affects long-term recovery, especially in rural and flood-prone districts like Matara.

Crisis Communication Models

To understand how media functions during and after disasters, several theoretical models of crisis communication have been proposed. Among the most widely cited is the Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) model developed by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The CERC model emphasizes the importance of tailoring communication to the specific stage of a crisis: pre-crisis, initial event, maintenance, resolution, and evaluation (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). It stresses trust-building, message clarity, and the management of uncertainty as critical components of effective communication.

Another foundational framework is Shannon and Weaver's Transmission Model of communication (1949), which conceptualizes communication as the linear transmission of a message from sender to receiver. While this model has been critiqued for its simplicity, it remains useful for analyzing how emergency messages are encoded and transmitted via television broadcasting. However, critics argue that it overlooks the role of the audience in interpreting messages, a limitation addressed by the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT).

UGT, first articulated by Katz et al. (1974), posits that audiences are active agents who select media content based on their psychological and social needs. During disasters, these needs may include reassurance, community connection, practical advice, or emotional catharsis. Television, with its visual and emotional appeal, can effectively meet these needs by portraying solidarity, survivor stories, and official

instructions. However, this capacity is often underutilized due to standardized programming, lack of localized content, or poor coordination with emergency agencies.

Integrating these models, the present study argues that crisis communication through television must move beyond mere information transmission. It must address emotional, psychological, and communal dimensions of recovery, especially in the aftermath of repeated trauma such as recurrent flooding.

South Asian and Sri Lankan Studies on Disaster Media

Research in South Asia has demonstrated the central role of various media platforms, particularly radio, newspapers, and digital media in disaster contexts. In India and Bangladesh, community radio has been lauded for its ability to deliver localized, culturally sensitive content that supports recovery and mobilization (Ahmed & Chowdhury, 2018). Similarly, newspaper campaigns in Nepal following the 2015 earthquake helped raise awareness, mobilize donations, and create political pressure for faster recovery (Subedi, 2016).

In Sri Lanka, studies have highlighted the role of media in the immediate response to disasters, particularly during the 2004 tsunami (Samarajiva, 2005). Researchers noted the effectiveness of both state and private broadcasters in relaying emergency alerts and coordinating aid. However, post-tsunami studies also criticized media for sensationalism, lack of follow-up reporting, and the marginalization of affected communities' voices (Senarath & Wickramasinghe, 2006).

More recent research has shifted focus toward digital media platforms. Social media, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp, have been studied for their role in citizen-led information sharing during the 2017 and 2021 floods in Sri Lanka (Jayarathna & De Zoysa, 2022). While these platforms have enabled rapid updates and mutual aid, they also present challenges such as misinformation, digital divides, and the exclusion of older or rural populations.

Despite the growing literature on digital and print media in disaster contexts, few studies have systematically examined the role of **television**—the most widely consumed medium in Sri Lanka—in post-disaster recovery. While television channels such as Rupavahini and Sirasa TV have historically covered disasters extensively, the content has often been limited to initial event coverage rather than long-term recovery narratives. This gap is particularly concerning given the ongoing vulnerability of regions like Matara, where repeated flooding necessitates sustained communication strategies.

The Role of Television in Psychosocial Support

Television, by virtue of its audio-visual format, is uniquely positioned to provide psychosocial support in disaster contexts. Visual storytelling enables viewers to see others like themselves coping with adversity, which can promote emotional healing, collective empathy, and a sense of solidarity. Studies in post-earthquake Haiti and Japan have shown that survivor interviews, community rebuilding features, and culturally resonant narratives can help reduce psychological distress and support recovery (Sugimoto et al., 2014; Kim & Ahn, 2015).

In the Sri Lankan context, however, there is limited empirical evidence on how television supports psychosocial recovery. Anecdotal reports suggest that programs such as *Sithin Witharak* and *Ada Derana 24* occasionally highlight post-disaster stories, but these efforts lack systematic planning or trauma-informed approaches. Psychologists argue that media has a duty to avoid retraumatizing content and instead focus on hope, coping strategies, and practical support (Ratnayake, 2020). This study, therefore, seeks to fill a significant research gap by evaluating how television in Sri Lanka, particularly in flood-prone districts like Matara, functions—or fails to function—as a tool of psychosocial intervention.

Community Resilience Theory

The concept of community resilience offers a theoretical foundation for understanding how societies recover from disasters. Resilience is commonly defined as the ability of individuals, groups, or systems to withstand, adapt to, and recover from adverse events (Norris et al., 2008). In disaster contexts, community resilience involves not just physical infrastructure but also social networks, trust, and the collective ability to learn and prepare for future crises.

Media can play a key role in fostering resilience by maintaining social connectedness, disseminating accurate information, and facilitating inclusive public discourse. Aldrich (2012) argues that social capital—defined by trust, norms, and networks—often determines the speed and sustainability of recovery more than physical aid. Television programs that highlight communal efforts, portray local heroes, and promote collective coping can therefore enhance resilience by strengthening community identity and cohesion.

Community resilience theory also highlights the importance of local knowledge, participation, and culturally appropriate interventions. Media, including television, must therefore reflect the lived experiences, languages, and recovery needs of specific communities. Generic, urban-centric coverage is unlikely to resonate with flood-affected populations in districts like Matara, where recovery involves localized

infrastructure, religious values, and familial networks. Thus, this study examines whether and how Sri Lankan television contributes to or undermines these resilience-building processes.

Synthesis and Theoretical Framework

Synthesizing the above literature, it becomes clear that while media in general, and television in particular can play a transformative role in disaster recovery, there are significant theoretical and practical gaps in its current deployment. The study draws on the following integrated theoretical framework:

1. Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC): to analyze the stage-wise role of television in disaster response and recovery.
2. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT): to understand how affected communities utilize television content for emotional, social, and informational needs.
3. Community Resilience Theory: to evaluate how television content contributes to social cohesion, trust, and long-term adaptation.

This tripartite framework allows for a multi-dimensional analysis of television broadcasting in post-flood recovery, bridging media theory with disaster studies and community psychology. It also enables the study to move beyond simplistic measures of media reach or frequency, focusing instead on content relevance, emotional impact, and audience engagement.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to understand television's role in post-flood community recovery between 2016 and 2023. The rationale for adopting a mixed-methods approach lies in the complexity of disaster communication phenomena, which cannot be fully understood through a single methodological lens. While quantitative data provide measurable insights into the reach and perceived effectiveness of television programming among affected populations, qualitative data enable a deeper exploration of stakeholder perspectives, lived experiences, and the contextual nuances influencing media production and consumption.

Although digital and social media are increasingly significant in disaster communication, this study deliberately focused on television due to its broad accessibility, high trust levels, and dominance in rural areas, ensuring depth within one medium.

The quantitative component involved structured surveys with 350 flood-affected residents to measure accessibility, viewing habits, and perceived effectiveness of television content. The qualitative component included 25 in-depth interviews with key informants—television producers, journalists, government officials, NGO representatives, and community leaders. Additionally, a content analysis of 50 flood-related television programs aired between 2016 and 2023 was conducted to evaluate thematic focus, framing, and cultural relevance. This triangulated approach enhances both reliability and validity, producing a rich understanding of how television serves as a recovery tool. This triangulated approach enhances both reliability and validity, producing a rich understanding of how television serves as a recovery tool.

Specifically, the quantitative component involves structured surveys with flood-affected residents to quantify the accessibility, usage patterns, and perceived impact of disaster-related television content. The qualitative component consists of in-depth interviews with key informants—including television producers, local government officials, disaster management personnel, and community leaders—to uncover the motivations, challenges, and strategies behind television broadcasting during disaster recovery phases. In addition, a content analysis of selected television programs related to flooding was conducted to systematically evaluate thematic focus, messaging strategies, and cultural relevance. Triangulating these data sources enhances the validity and reliability of the findings, offering a holistic understanding of television's role in post-disaster recovery.

The study focuses on flood-affected communities within the Matara District, which consists of multiple administrative divisions known as Grama Niladhari (GN) wards. To ensure representativeness and diversity in experiences, a multi-stage purposive sampling strategy was employed. Initially, wards were selected based on documented flood impact severity, using data from the Disaster Management Centre (DMC) of Sri Lanka and local government records spanning 2016 to 2023. Wards experiencing repeated and severe flooding were prioritized to capture sustained recovery challenges.

Within selected wards, households were randomly sampled for participation in the quantitative survey, ensuring inclusion of a broad demographic cross-section with respect to age, gender, occupation, and socioeconomic status. For qualitative interviews, purposive sampling targeted individuals directly involved in or affected by flood-related television broadcasting and recovery efforts. This included media personnel from regional and national television channels, local government disaster officers, community-based organization representatives, and residents recognized as community leaders or disaster survivors.

A total of 350 flood-affected residents participated in the quantitative survey, with ages ranging from 18 to 75 years. Approximately 52% were female, and 48% male, reflecting the gender distribution in the region. Participants represented a variety of occupations, including agriculture, fishing, small-scale trading, and service sectors, with the majority engaged in informal livelihoods vulnerable to flood disruptions. Educational backgrounds varied from primary schooling to tertiary education, allowing analysis of media impact across literacy levels.

The qualitative interview sample comprised 25 key informants. Among them, 10 were media professionals (producers, journalists, program directors) from prominent television channels such as Rupavahini, Sirasa TV, and independent regional broadcasters. Five were local government disaster management officers from Matara District administrative offices, responsible for coordinating relief and recovery efforts. Five additional interviews involved representatives of community-based organizations active in flood recovery, and five interviews were conducted with community leaders and flood survivors, including elders and women leaders recognized for their social influence.

The research instruments were developed following a thorough review of relevant literature and piloted in a neighboring district with similar flood conditions to ensure clarity, cultural appropriateness, and reliability.

Questionnaire Structure

The quantitative survey questionnaire consisted of five main sections:

1. Demographic Information: Age, gender, education, occupation, household size, and flood impact level.
2. Media Access and Consumption Patterns: Frequency of television viewing, preferred channels, and other media use.
3. Perceived Effectiveness of Television Broadcasting: Respondents' assessments of the timeliness, relevance, clarity, and trustworthiness of flood-related television content.
4. Emotional and Social Impact: Perceptions of whether television content provided emotional reassurance, promoted social cohesion, or influenced coping strategies.
5. Barriers and Suggestions: Accessibility issues (e.g., electricity, remote locations), content gaps, and recommendations for improving television programming for disaster recovery.

Responses primarily used Likert scales for attitudinal questions, supplemented by open-ended questions to capture nuanced feedback.

Interview Guides

Semi-structured interview guides were developed to facilitate in-depth conversations while allowing flexibility for participants to express detailed insights. Guides were tailored to each stakeholder group but commonly included questions on:

- Experiences and challenges in producing or using flood-related television content.
- Coordination mechanisms between broadcasters and disaster management agencies.
- Strategies employed to address diverse audience needs, including vulnerable populations.
- Perceptions of television's role in psychosocial support and community resilience.
- Suggestions for improving television's contribution to disaster recovery.

Interviews were conducted in Sinhala or English, according to participant preference, and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes.

Coding Manual for Content Analysis

The content analysis protocol was developed based on established frameworks in disaster communication research (e.g., Houston et al., 2012; Reuter et al., 2018). A sample of 50 television programs related to floods aired by major Sri Lankan broadcasters during and after flood events between 2016 and 2023 was analyzed.

The coding manual categorized content along the following dimensions:

- Thematic Focus: Early warning, emergency response, relief efforts, recovery stories, psychosocial support, community mobilization.
- Message Framing: Positive (resilience, hope) versus negative (loss, vulnerability).
- Audience Targeting: General public versus specific groups (e.g., women, children, elderly).
- Use of Local Language and Cultural Symbols: Degree of localization in language, imagery, and narratives.
- Coordination Signals: References to official agencies, disaster management bodies, and relief organizations.

Two independent coders were trained to ensure inter-coder reliability, achieving a Cohen's kappa coefficient of 0.82, indicating high agreement.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted over a six-month period from January to June 2024. Quantitative surveys were administered face-to-face by trained field enumerators fluent in Sinhala and familiar with the local context. Surveys were conducted at respondents' homes or community centers to ensure privacy and comfort.

Qualitative interviews were scheduled in advance, conducted in safe and accessible locations such as media offices, government buildings, or community halls. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Content analysis involved collecting recorded television programs from broadcaster archives and publicly available digital platforms. Selected programs were coded using qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12 to manage and analyze the data systematically.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical protocols to protect participant rights and dignity. Ethical approval was obtained from the Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Colombo.

All participants were provided with informed consent forms detailing the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was guaranteed by anonymizing participant identities and securely storing data on password-protected devices.

Special care was taken when interviewing disaster survivors to avoid traumatization. Interviewers were trained in trauma-sensitive communication and referred participants to local counseling services when distress was observed.

Limitations

Despite rigorous design and implementation, the study acknowledges several limitations. First, recall bias may have affected respondents' accuracy in reporting their media consumption and perceptions over the extended 2016–2023 period, especially given the multiple flood events. Second, access issues limited data collection in some highly remote or severely affected wards due to infrastructure damage or ongoing recovery activities, potentially biasing results towards more accessible populations.

Third, the study's focus on television excludes other emerging media platforms such as social media and mobile communication, which are increasingly important in disaster contexts but fall outside the scope of this research. Lastly, the purposive sampling of key informants, while necessary for expert insights, limits generalizability to other regions or media contexts.

Nevertheless, through methodological triangulation and careful sampling, the study offers a robust and nuanced understanding of television broadcasting's role in community recovery in Matara's flood-affected communities.

Results and Findings

This section presents the findings of the study in three main parts: quantitative survey results, qualitative insights from interviews, and content analysis of flood-related television programs. These are followed by three case vignettes that illustrate how television influenced community recovery in specific flood-affected areas of the Matara District.

Survey Results: Television Access, Use, and Perceived Effectiveness

The survey conducted among 350 residents in flood-affected Grama Niladhari (GN) divisions revealed notable patterns in media access, usage, and perception. Approximately 78% of respondents reported regular access to a television, either in their households or through shared community facilities. However, this access varied between urban and rural settings. In semi-urban divisions, 89% had television access, while in more remote rural wards, this number dropped to 62%, primarily due to poor infrastructure, power outages, or lack of devices.

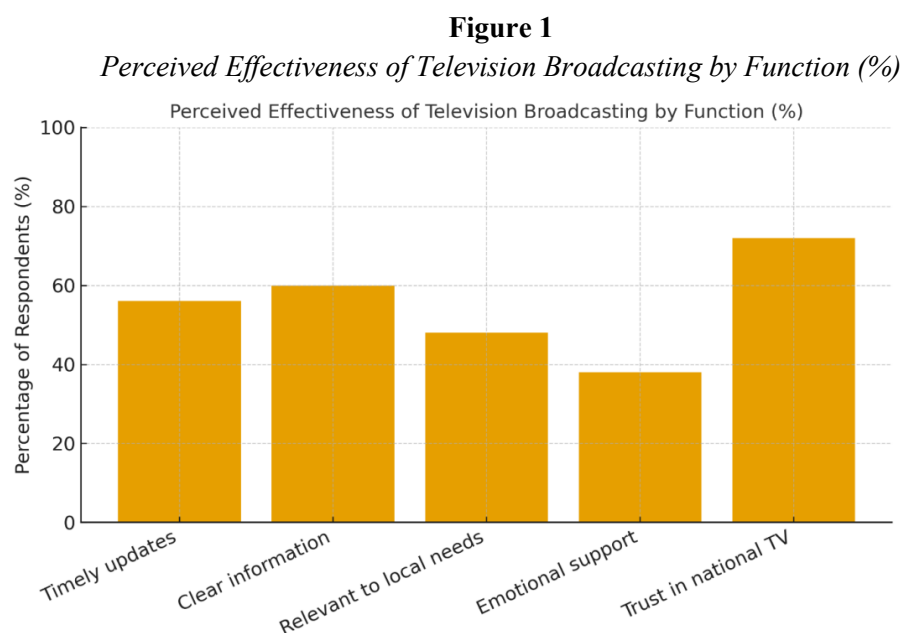
Television viewing frequency was generally high among those with access. About 65% of respondents reported watching television daily, while another 22% viewed it several times a week. Viewing was concentrated during the evening hours, especially around news bulletins and local current affairs programs. When asked to identify their preferred television stations, 45% of participants cited Rupavahini, 32% named Sirasa TV, 15% Swarnavahini, and the remaining 8% regional broadcasters. These choices often reflected perceived trustworthiness and ease of understanding, especially in the Sinhala language.

Regarding the perceived effectiveness of flood-related television programming, responses varied across dimensions. About 56% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that television provided timely updates during floods, and 60% found the information to be clearly presented. However, only 48% felt that the content was directly relevant to their local needs, and even fewer—just 38%—believed that

television helped them cope emotionally with the stress of repeated flooding. Notably, 72% expressed trust in the information provided on national television during disaster periods, suggesting a general credibility advantage over newer platforms like social media.

Cross-tabulation analyses revealed significant differences in perception based on demographic variables. Urban participants and those with higher educational backgrounds were more likely to rate the clarity and timeliness of television content positively. Conversely, low-income and rural respondents were more critical, often citing poor access and a lack of content tailored to their experiences. This suggests an urban-rural divide in both access to and satisfaction with televised disaster communication.

Several barriers to effective communication emerged from open-ended responses. About 34% of respondents mentioned electricity outages during floods as a major impediment to watching TV, especially during critical warning periods. Others pointed to a lack of programming in Tamil or in local dialects spoken by older residents. Furthermore, 41% of respondents indicated that the programming often lacked practical recovery guidance and emotional reassurance, instead focusing narrowly on damage and relief.



Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number based on survey data collected in flood-affected Grama Niladhari divisions of Matara District (2024).

Interview Findings: Stakeholder Perspectives and Thematic Analysis

In-depth interviews with 25 key informants—including media professionals, disaster officers, NGO workers, and community leaders—revealed four central themes: coordination challenges, lack of localization, psychosocial potential, and suggestions for improvement.

First, coordination between television broadcasters and disaster management agencies was found to be weak and inconsistent. Television producers reported that they often received delayed or incomplete information from authorities during disaster periods. One senior producer from Rupavahini explained, “We often receive information late or in fragmented forms, making it difficult to deliver timely updates. There is no formal communication protocol between broadcasters and disaster management.” This view was echoed by local officials, who admitted that information sharing with media outlets was often ad hoc rather than institutionalized.

The second theme pertained to the limited cultural and regional sensitivity of flood-related programming. Interviewees from Matara-based communities expressed concern that national television coverage was heavily skewed toward urban or Western Province narratives. As one community leader remarked, “Most disaster coverage focuses on Colombo or urban centers. Our stories, customs, and recovery challenges are rarely shown, which makes people feel neglected.” Television producers acknowledged this issue, attributing it to budget constraints, limited human resources in regional stations, and centralized editorial control.

The third major theme was the underutilized potential of television as a source of emotional support and psychosocial healing. Although most broadcasters made efforts to include survivor stories, inspirational messages, or religious reflections, there was little consistency or planning in these efforts. A program director at Sirasa TV noted, “We try to include survivor stories and messages of hope, but there’s no structured approach or training on trauma-informed reporting.” Survivors expressed mixed reactions: some were comforted by stories of shared struggle and recovery, while others found repeated images of devastation emotionally distressing.

Finally, stakeholders provided a range of suggestions to improve television’s contribution to disaster recovery. These included strengthening institutional partnerships between media and emergency agencies, investing in training for journalists in crisis communication, and decentralizing content production to allow more localized storytelling. There was broad consensus that media professionals must be better equipped to understand and represent the diverse recovery needs of communities like those in Matara.

Content Analysis of Television Programs

A total of 50 television programs related to floods, aired from 2016 to 2023, were systematically analyzed. These programs were coded based on thematic focus, message framing, audience targeting, localization, and institutional coordination.

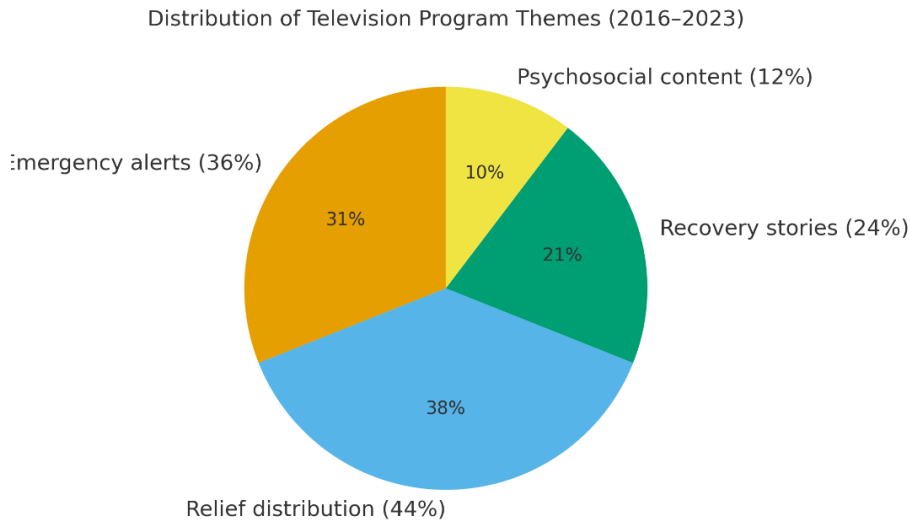
In terms of content themes, emergency warnings and relief efforts dominated the broadcasts. Emergency alerts appeared in 36% of programs, while 44% focused on documenting relief distribution and immediate responses. Long-term recovery stories featured in just 24% of the programs, and only 12% included content addressing psychosocial healing or emotional resilience. These findings suggest that the television industry's disaster response is heavily event-driven, with less attention to long-term recovery phases.

Regarding message framing, 58% of the content employed a negative framing, highlighting damage, loss, and helplessness. In contrast, only 28% presented positive framing such as community solidarity, personal recovery stories, or messages of resilience. Neutral and fact-based reports accounted for the remaining 14%. This imbalance may contribute to heightened anxiety and helplessness among viewers during the recovery period.

Audience targeting also revealed significant gaps. The vast majority of programs (82%) were aimed at the general public without tailoring content to vulnerable populations such as women, children, the elderly, or linguistic minorities. Only 6% of programs used Tamil or regional dialects, limiting their inclusivity. Furthermore, just 24% of the analyzed content incorporated local cultural symbols, traditions, or religious frameworks that might resonate more deeply with flood-affected communities.

Institutional coordination between broadcasters and official disaster agencies appeared weak. Only 36% of programs explicitly referenced official instructions, government policies, or relief partners. Most content was reactive and journalistic, rather than being integrated into broader recovery communication strategies.

Figure 2
Distribution of Television Program Themes (2016–2023)



Community Vignettes: Lived Experiences of Television and Recovery

To humanize the statistical and thematic findings, three narrative vignettes are presented based on field interviews with residents and producers.

Vignette 1: Mrs. Anoma – Emotional Strength through Television

Mrs. Anoma, a 45-year-old mother from a semi-urban ward in Matara, described how television supported her recovery after her home was destroyed in the 2021 floods. “When I saw other families on TV rebuilding and sharing their stories, I felt I was not alone,” she said. “The news showed us how to access government support and reminded us to keep hope alive.” She noted that religious content and traditional music broadcast during community programs gave her a sense of peace and stability. However, she also emphasized the need for such content to be more consistent and locally representative.

Vignette 2: Mr. Saman – Barriers to Access in Rural Areas

Mr. Saman, a 58-year-old fisherman in a rural division, shared the limitations he faced during the floods. “The power went out during the worst days, so we missed important announcements. Also, many older people here don’t understand Sinhala very well. We rely more on word of mouth or the temple loudspeaker.” His

experience highlights the digital and linguistic divide that television programming must overcome to be fully inclusive.

Vignette 3: Ms. Nadeesha – A Producer’s Perspective

Ms. Nadeesha, a journalist with a regional broadcaster, offered an insider view of production constraints. “We want to tell the real stories of people rebuilding, but we’re limited by lack of training, time pressure, and poor coordination with disaster agencies. Sometimes we re-air the same footage for days. We need investment in training and stronger local partnerships if we are to do justice to these stories.” Her comments reveal structural barriers that inhibit the full realization of television’s potential as a recovery tool.

Summary of Visual Trends (to be presented as charts/graphs)

To supplement these findings, the following visual aids are recommended:

- A bar chart comparing survey responses on perceived effectiveness of television in terms of timeliness, clarity, trust, relevance, and emotional support.
- A pie chart illustrating the distribution of program themes (emergency response, recovery, psychosocial content, etc.).
- A line graph comparing television access across urban and rural wards.
- A word cloud generated from qualitative transcripts showing the most frequently cited concepts such as “coordination,” “trust,” “information,” “hope,” and “community.”

This section has shown that while television broadcasting in Sri Lanka, especially in the Matara District, has played an important role in post-flood communication, several limitations hinder its full effectiveness. Unequal access, weak localization, lack of psychosocial focus, and poor institutional coordination are among the major challenges. However, the medium still holds strong potential to support disaster recovery if strategically aligned with community needs, especially by building local capacities and integrating culturally sensitive narratives.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the nuanced role that television broadcasting plays in the recovery processes of flood-affected communities in the Matara District of Sri Lanka. When interpreted through the lens of established communication theories and compared with global disaster media research, a more comprehensive

picture emerges—highlighting both the potential and the limitations of Sri Lankan television in disaster contexts.

Interpreting Findings in Light of Communication Theories

Drawing on the Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) model, this study found that Sri Lankan television fulfills its function best during the “initial event” and “maintenance” stages of a crisis. The high trust placed in television by respondents, particularly during the immediate aftermath of floods, aligns with the CERC model’s emphasis on credibility, clarity, and rapid response. However, the model also emphasizes the importance of continuity and public reassurance during the “resolution” and “evaluation” stages—functions that the study found to be underdeveloped in Sri Lankan programming.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) further explains audience behavior during floods. Survey data showed that people turned to television not only for practical information (such as weather forecasts and shelter locations) but also for emotional reassurance and a sense of collective identity. Yet, qualitative responses also revealed dissatisfaction with the emotional tone and cultural disconnect in many programs. This suggests that Sri Lankan broadcasters are not fully meeting audience psychological and social needs, an important consideration within the UGT framework.

The findings also reinforce the relevance of Community Resilience Theory, which highlights how collective narratives and localized storytelling can support social cohesion. Programs that shared survivor stories or featured local efforts were described by participants as particularly helpful. However, such content was scarce, and most programs lacked consistency or structure in framing positive resilience messages. This gap between theory and practice represents a missed opportunity to embed media more strategically within community recovery frameworks.

Comparing Sri Lankan Findings to International Studies

Globally, media, especially television has played key roles in post-disaster recovery efforts. For instance, in post-tsunami Japan and post-earthquake Haiti, broadcasters actively included trauma-informed programming, community rebuilding narratives, and culturally sensitive messaging (Sugimoto et al., 2014; Kim & Ahn, 2015). In contrast, Sri Lankan television has been slower to adapt to such practices. While it is widely used during crises, its post-crisis programming remains ad hoc, with little evidence of trauma-informed production practices or institutional guidelines for disaster communication.

In Bangladesh and Nepal, local community media and radio networks have been integrated into government disaster preparedness strategies. In contrast, Sri Lanka's broadcast infrastructure remains heavily centralized, leaving regional stations underfunded and underrepresented. The present study shows that most disaster-related content is produced in Colombo and often lacks relevance for rural communities in Matara District.

Another important contrast is the proactive involvement of media in policy discussions in countries like India and Indonesia. In Sri Lanka, interviewees highlighted a gap in formal communication protocols between television broadcasters and agencies such as the Disaster Management Centre (DMC). While ad hoc collaborations do occur, the absence of clear guidelines or memoranda of understanding has led to misalignment between public communication needs and media outputs.

The Role of Local Culture and Media Practices

The uptake and effectiveness of disaster-related television content in Sri Lanka must also be understood within its unique cultural and media landscape. Sri Lankan society is deeply shaped by local customs, religious values, and community identities. Respondents often noted the importance of seeing familiar faces, landmarks, and dialects on screen during moments of crisis. Programs that featured local leaders or cultural rituals provided emotional reassurance and legitimacy.

However, the centralization of media production in urban areas undermines the potential for this cultural resonance. Rural audiences reported feeling alienated by “generic” disaster narratives that did not reflect their specific situations. Furthermore, the limited use of Tamil and local dialects in television programming risks excluding linguistic minorities in flood-prone areas of the South. These limitations suggest that unless television programming is made more localized and inclusive, its impact on community recovery will remain uneven.

Implications for Broadcast Practice and Disaster Policy

This study has significant implications for broadcasters, policymakers, and disaster communication planners in Sri Lanka. First, the lack of localized, culturally sensitive, and trauma-informed programming is a major shortfall. Second, the absence of institutional collaboration between media and disaster management agencies leads to fragmentation and missed communication opportunities. Third, while television remains the most trusted source of disaster information, it is underutilized as a recovery tool—particularly for building resilience and emotional healing.

To address these gaps, broadcasters must expand their role beyond event coverage to include sustained community engagement. This requires training, funding, and collaboration with local stakeholders. Disaster communication should not be an occasional feature, but an integrated part of national disaster risk reduction (DRR) policy frameworks. At the same time, community-based organizations and the DMC must recognize media as a strategic partner, not merely a tool for disseminating alerts.

However, the study's scope is geographically limited to the Matara District and relies on a sample of 350 residents; therefore, its findings should be interpreted within this localized context.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following actionable recommendations are proposed for television broadcasters, the Disaster Management Centre (DMC), and relevant NGOs working in disaster communication and community recovery:

1. Establish Formal Protocols between Broadcasters and DMC

- Action: Develop standardized guidelines for emergency and recovery communication, outlining roles, contact points, and approval procedures.
- Lead Agencies: DMC, Ministry of Media
- Timeline: Within 6 months
- Resources Needed: Legal drafting support, inter-agency workshops

2. Develop Localized Recovery Programming

- Action: Allocate airtime for region-specific programs in flood-affected districts, featuring local voices, languages, and cultural narratives.
- Lead Agencies: National and regional TV stations
- Timeline: Pilot within 1 year
- Resources Needed: Local production teams, language translators, equipment

3. Train Journalists in Crisis and Trauma-Sensitive Communication

- Action: Introduce mandatory training modules on trauma-informed reporting and disaster ethics for reporters covering floods and recovery.
- Lead Agencies: Sri Lanka Press Institute, Media Training Academies
- Timeline: Within 9 months
- Resources Needed: Trainers, curriculum materials, funding

4. Create a Centralized Archive of Recovery Content

- Action: Build a digital library of high-quality recovery stories, educational features, and community initiatives that broadcasters can draw on.
- Lead Agencies: University media research centers, TV stations
- Timeline: Ongoing
- Resources Needed: Digital infrastructure, editorial staff

5. Incentivize Community Participation in Program Development

- Action: Launch grants or competitions for community organizations to co-produce recovery-related television segments.
- Lead Agencies: NGOs, CSR arms of media companies
- Timeline: Annually
- Resources Needed: Grant funds, production support

Evaluation Framework

A monitoring and evaluation framework should be implemented using:

- Pre/post-viewership surveys in affected communities
- Content audits to assess localization, diversity, and emotional framing
- Focus groups to understand audience reception
- Impact indicators such as awareness of recovery services, reported emotional support, and trust in television

This framework should be reviewed annually to ensure continuous improvement.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how television broadcasting has contributed to community recovery in flood-affected areas of the Matara District between 2016 and 2023. Through a mixed-methods approach combining surveys, interviews, and content analysis, it found that while television remains a trusted and widely accessed medium during disasters, its potential for supporting long-term recovery and resilience remains underexploited.

Television in Sri Lanka has largely focused on the immediate aftermath of floods—reporting on damage, rescue, and relief efforts. However, recovery is not just logistical; it is also emotional, social, and cultural. The study found that survivors value programs that reflect their lived experiences, offer practical support, and instill hope. Yet such content remains scarce. Institutional gaps between media and disaster

agencies, lack of localized production, and poor training in trauma-sensitive journalism all contribute to this shortfall.

In terms of theory, the research contributes to the application of CERC, UGT, and community resilience frameworks in South Asian media contexts. It demonstrates the need to shift from unidirectional, crisis-oriented communication toward participatory, empathetic, and regionally tailored recovery media strategies.

Nonetheless, the study has limitations. The retrospective nature of surveys may have introduced recall bias, and the focus on television excludes the growing role of digital and social media in disaster communication. Future research could expand on this study by examining the role of multi-platform media strategies, including mobile alerts, YouTube, and citizen journalism.

Overall, the findings call for an urgent rethinking of the role of television in disaster recovery—not as a passive platform for updates, but as an active partner in rebuilding lives, trust, and resilience.

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