

A Study of Disinformation on Social Media During Disasters: The Case of the Dam Burst¹

Mahmut Enes Ağca² 

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Abstract

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Disaster refers to situations that emerge suddenly and surpass the existing response capabilities. In Turkey, a disaster situation emerged on February 6, 2023, after two major earthquakes centered in Kahramanmaraş. While rescue operations were underway after the earthquake, disinformation that the walls of Hatay Yarseli Dam, located in the disaster zone, had cracked and that the dam would explode spread rapidly on social media, which created an aura of panic in the region, and rescue activities and aid activities were interrupted. In this study, the case study technique was used within the framework of the qualitative research method. On the axis of the post on BaBaLa TV, one of the accounts that spread the dam Cracked disinformation on social media and the explanations of the relevant institution official about the process of making the social media post that caused the disinformation to spread, disinformation in social media, and the importance of the concept of verification in journalism were examined. In the study, it was concluded that Babala TV neglected the ethical working principles of journalism due to its inattention and incorrect verification practices in the verification of received information, which is the basis of journalism, and that disinformation was spread due to negligence.

Introduction

Disasters are crisis situations that emerge as a result of natural or human-induced events that far exceed the capacity to respond to the situation in the event of the realization of undesirable risks. In times of disaster, all members of society, especially public institutions, have various responsibilities. The

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²Res. Assist., İstinye University, Faculty of Communication, New Media and Communication Department, enes.agca@istinye.edu.tr

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responsibility of the media in times of disaster can be described as providing accurate information to the people in the disaster area and to all other people who are concerned about the situation in the disaster area in the fastest way possible. However, in the studies conducted before, during, and after the disaster periods (Vural et al., 2022a; Vural et al., 2022b; Vural et al., 2022c; Budak, 2023), it was highlighted that the media did not include content for citizens to be prepared for disasters before the earthquake, and during the disaster, the dramatic aspects of the events that occurred were emphasized and individual human stories were directed. However, considering that the media has an agenda-setting feature, it is possible that it can play an important role in drawing the attention of society to disasters and disaster preparedness. However, it is seen that events with magazine value are reported when it comes to disasters. In addition to traditional media, social media is also one of the important news sources where citizens can follow current developments (We Are Social, 2023). In addition to its role as a news source where daily news is rapidly disseminated, social media also plays a role in the spreading of disinformation. In this context, the infodemic and the rapid spread of conspiracy theories on social media are current topics related to disinformation. In this study, the disinformation issue during disasters is examined by utilizing the case study technique. In the research, disinformation debates in public opinion were brought to the agenda in the focus of the post of the social media account named BabalaTV, which was at the focus of the disinformation debates in public opinion about the disinformation spread about the cracking of the Yarseli Dam in Hatay after the earthquake that occurred on February 6, 2023, and the official of the relevant institution made explanations about the process of publishing the relevant content. In this study, these statements are analyzed in the context of the ethical working principles of journalism. It was concluded that Babala TV was negligent in verifying the information, which is one of the basic issues of journalism, and that careless sharing by an organization engaged in journalistic activity due to negligence leads to disinformation.

Social Responsibility of Media in Disasters

Disasters may be defined as the transformation of human-based or natural situations that arise in the usual life of a society into a crisis situation by going far beyond the existing response capacity (IFRC, no date). Disasters, which occur as a result of the realization of undesired risks, have consequences such as disruption in the daily life practices of the society and even the inability to provide the basic needs of daily life (Turoğlu, no date). Therefore, a disaster is not an event in itself, but the result of an event (AFAD, no date).

Disaster management comes to the forefront in preventing the possible consequences of disasters and reducing the negative consequences that may arise. In disaster management, while the works carried out, from strengthening the critical structures likely to be affected by disasters to raising awareness among citizens about disasters, lead to the importance of the concept of risk management before the disaster, coordination during the disaster and the recovery process after the disaster are seen as part of crisis management (Erkal and Değerliyurt, 2009). In the management of disasters, responsibility is generally attributed to public institutions (Platania et al., 2022). In addition to the responsibility of public institutions, it is possible to say that non-governmental organizations, the media, and citizens also have their own responsibilities. In the Turkish Disaster Management Strategy Document prepared by AFAD, stakeholders in disaster management are defined as public institutions, international organizations, local administrations, non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, the private sector, the media, individuals, and families (AFAD, 2015). Communicating both among the stakeholders in disaster management and the people who are likely to be directly affected by the disaster is of utmost importance for successful disaster management in terms of disaster preparedness. Furthermore, ensuring that the information needs of citizens are met by disaster management during and after the disaster has the power to restrict the circulation of disinformation by reducing the need for citizens to turn to different sources of information. Therefore, it can be argued that an important part of disaster management is disaster communication. A society may be prepared for disasters on the axis of scientific knowledge (Koç Akgül, 2021: 31). In the communication activities carried out for disaster preparedness,

disaster communication includes the process of risk communication in a way by informing the target audiences about the risks, what to do during the disaster, and the process after the disaster (Zemp, 2010).

It can be argued that the target audiences in disaster communication are similar to those in the disaster management process. Citizens, public institutions, non-governmental organizations, and the media are the elements of the disaster communication process. Boztepe Taşkıran (2023: 360) states that in order to be successful in directing the target audience to attitudes and behaviors, disaster communication strategies are risk communication for the disaster, response communication to meet the need for information during the disaster, and providing the communication required during the recovery period after the disaster in an uninterrupted, clear, and understandable manner. It can be argued that the media constitutes an important element of disaster management in this respect. When evaluated in the context of disaster communication, it is possible to argue that the media has various duties, such as broadcasting for disaster preparedness before the disaster, rapidly delivering the information needed to the disaster victims during and after the disaster, and then enlightening the general public. It can be said that the press is responsible for providing citizens with the information they need in a timely, clear, and comprehensible manner in accordance with serving the public's right to know (Özgen, 2006: 132). In terms of normative media theories, the responsibility of the media to convey accurate and complete information to the public in the fastest way possible in disasters can also be associated with the social responsibility of the media. In accordance with the social responsibility theory, the media should not forget that it has responsibilities towards society, and in line with this responsibility, it is responsible for conveying the information that citizens need in accordance with reality and from an objective point of view (McQuail, 2010: 147).

There are studies that have made the social responsibility of the media in disasters a research topic. In a content analysis study conducted by Vural et al. covering traditional media and new media in the sample of news coverage of the 2019 Istanbul earthquake, it was found that the media almost did not cover news about disaster preparedness before the disaster occurred, and that news about the earthquake before or after the earthquake was informative about the general situation (Vural et al., 2022a; Vural et al., 2022b; Vural et al., 2022c). In another study examining the media after the earthquake disaster in Turkey in February 2023, it was concluded that the media was far from an understanding that prioritized social benefit and that traumatic incidents were dramatized and presented (Budak, 2023). Therefore, it is possible to argue that the media does not fulfill its social responsibility in disaster preparedness, and instead of preparing society to be resilient to disasters, it acts with a reactive attitude that conveys daily developments.

Disinformation in Digital Journalism

In cases such as disasters that affect the whole or a part of society, the media has more responsibility. In addition to mass media, social media is one of the sources that people frequently use to seek information during and after disasters (Huiberts, 2020). In addition, social media is a news source for journalists where they get information about the developments in daily life and what is happening around them (Taşkıran and Kırık, 2016; Duman, 2019). While there are relatively few media outlets in traditional media because publishing requires various investments and organization, social media allows users to produce and share content, and each user has become a publisher or journalist. In this respect, social media can be said to increase freedom of thought and expression and encourage citizen journalism. On the other hand, new media publishing has gained importance as the advertising industry has shifted its attention from traditional mass media to new media-based communication environments. Companies with a presence in traditional media have tended to adapt to digital transformation. For example, Habertürk newspaper ended its printed journalism in 2018 and continues its activities entirely with digital publishing facilities (Ntv.com.tr., 2018).

New media environments offer new opportunities for journalism, both as an infrastructure for the delivery of news and in terms of types of journalism. On the other hand, it also harbors certain risks. It is possible to evaluate the risks in new media from a wide range of perspectives, from cyber security risks to online violence. In the context of journalism, disinformation is one of the main risks in new media. With social media, users' content production has led to intensive information production; however, this information produced by users includes falsehoods and uncertainties as well as truths (Öztürk, 2022). It is possible to think of disinformation as a general term used to describe false information. Disinformation is defined as the deliberate distortion of information in a way that leads to misunderstandings (American Psychological Association, 2022). Chandler and Munday (2011: 91) also see disinformation directly as misinformation. On the other hand, according to Wardle (2017), distortion of information in a way that allows for misunderstanding is only one of the types of disinformation. Disinformation is divided into seven types: parody content, misunderstandable content, falsification and imitation, content based on outright lies, false context, false association, and manipulated content (Wardle, 2017).

Aslan (2009: 167–168) categorized disinformation as biased information, inadequate information, exaggerated information, irrelevant information, and false information. In addition to disinformation, another concept used in the dissemination of misinformation is misinformation. Misinformation is defined as the sharing of false information without any intent to harm (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017).

When social media and the concept of disinformation are considered together, it can be argued that social media plays an important role in the exercise of freedom of expression by enabling users to produce content. Social media users are more inclined to accept information from people they follow on social media without questioning its accuracy (Shao et al., 2020). Other factors that play a role in the spread of disinformation on social media are journalists sharing news without checking the accuracy of the news, presenting ambiguous information without finalization, bot accounts on social media, and individuals being more sensitive to negative news under the influence of personal factors (such as anxiety disorder and poor media literacy) (Shu et al., 2020). On the other hand, it can be argued that in cases where posts on social media are made with the conscious intention of harming a person or an institution, disinformation is caused by untrue information, and this disinformation has harmful effects on society. In the context of journalism, it is necessary to be much more careful against disinformation in new media broadcasting compared to traditional media, and journalists should approach social media-based data from a much more questioning perspective.

Methods

On February 6, 2023, a disaster situation emerged as a result of two earthquakes centered in Kahramanmaraş. Various forms of disinformation have also emerged during disaster periods. In this study, the importance of the concepts of professionalization in journalism and confirmation in journalism will be discussed through the sharing of the social media account named Babala TV, which played a role in the spread of misinformation that the Hatay Yarseli Dam cracked and posed a threat to the people of the region, and the subsequent statements of the relevant institution officials. The reason why Babala TV is the subject of the study is that the claim that the dam has cracked has been on the agenda of the media, and Oğuzhan Uğur, the owner of the social media account, has made a nationwide agenda with his statements on the subject.

Findings

On February 6, 2023, a disaster situation emerged as a result of two earthquakes centered in Kahramanmaraş. Various forms of disinformation have also emerged during disaster periods. In this study, the importance of the concepts of professionalization in journalism and confirmation in journalism will be discussed through the sharing of the social media account named Babala TV, which played a role in the spread of misinformation that the Hatay Yarseli Dam cracked and posed a threat to

the people of the region, and the subsequent statements of the relevant institution officials. The reason why Babala TV is the subject of the study is that the claim that the dam has cracked has been on the agenda of the media, and Oğuzhan Uğur, the owner of the social media account, has made a nationwide agenda with his statements on the subject.



Image 1. Screenshot Shows Content Shared by Babala TV

Source: <https://www.sondakika.com/haber/haber-kahramanmaras-merkezli-2-deprem-afeti-sonrasi-15630131/>

Image 1 shows the post made by BaBaLa TV on Twitter. On February 7, 2023 at 07.40, the content shared is "Hatay Antakya Yarseli Dam wall cracked. For God's sake, send a team here, it is raining a lot". Four days later, on February 11, 2023, the news spread among the people that the dam had burst and they panicked and tried to leave the city (Sondakika.com, 2023).



Image 2. Image showing people trying to leave Hatay after the lie that the dam exploded

Source: <https://twitter.com/HaberMujdeli/status/1624652964123082752>

Videos of posts in which law enforcement officers warned earthquake victims about the claim that the dam had burst and that the incident did not reflect the truth were shared on social media. In one of these posts, a police officer warns citizens as follows (Oda TV, 2023):

Police: Who is the one who reported the dam explosion?

Citizen: Commissar, it was not a report; men rushed from that side to this side.

Police: Looters, just looters.

Citizen: One said the car exploded, the other said the dam exploded.

Police: Looters make a report to 155. Our 155 doesn't know that the call is false. Probably the citizen hears it on the radio from other police officers and panics that something like this is going on. But the looters are doing this so that you evacuate and they can continue looting.

In one of the videos showing the situation, an AFAD volunteer who participated in search and rescue operations in the region says the following:

"...After that fuss, we lost our energy and our motivation... It was around 12 or 1 o'clock at night. We were at the wreckage. When they told us like that, we had no energy left. Morale also broke down. The enthusiasm also broke down. We were working in the wreckage. We were in the wreckage. They told us that the dam had burst. Run to the mountains and save your lives. We didn't understand the incident at first; we had no idea what to do. Then, just as we were getting into the vehicles and moving, we were informed. The report was false. We lost both time and energy. We were unable to work. Our hands and feet got tangled. We were unable to work until the morning. Maybe it cost a lot of people their lives."

In light of the witness statements above, which show the negative impact of disinformation on the rescue efforts in the region, it can be argued that the lie that the dam cracked had a negative impact on the people of the region as well as the search and rescue efforts in the region.

Parliament Member Aykut Erdoğan shared a video on his Twitter account on the issue. In this video, Erdoğan says the following:

We're just not going to panic... Now in Hatay, they shouted from a vehicle that a dam had burst. There was chaos here. Roads were closed in an instant. This information is not correct. No dam has exploded. I immediately spoke to the provincial gendarmerie commander. I mean, people shouldn't panic; it's a pity. I hope we will find whoever did it.

The claims that Hatay Yarseli Dam has cracked have been denied by the official authorities. The first official statement was made by then Hatay Governor Rahmi Doğan on Twitter. Doğan said on his personal Twitter account, "The news that Yarseli Dam burst is completely LIE. There is no problem in our dams. Do not believe news other than official statements."



Image 3. Screenshot showing the statement of the Governor of Hatay at the time, Rahmi Doğan, on his social media account

Even though the official authorities stated that the news was false after the disinformation spread, the lie that the dam exploded became one of the most debated issues in the aftermath of the earthquake due to its disruption of search and rescue efforts and aid activities for earthquake victims in the disaster zone. Following widespread media reports that the social media account BaBaLa TV was the first to spread the lie that the dam had burst, the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office launched an ex officio investigation and took the statement of Oğuzhan Uğur, the owner of the relevant social media account (Sozcu.com.tr, 2023). Uğur made a video statement shortly after his testimony, and his words are as follows:

"A report comes to our friend. A lady introducing herself as a ministry official says, "Sir, we have received satellite images; we need to announce this to people; please share it. Our friend confirms that the woman is a ministry official on LinkedIn. And he saw some news that was shared a day before us. Newspapers and the Malatya Governorship are among the statements. Our friend accepts all of these as verification and shares this tweet. When it turned out to be a lie a few hours later, he immediately removed the tweet. It is not possible for me to know about the tweet. It is also not possible for the main team to know about it. Because Babala TV shares 1000 tweets in 5 minutes. Because unfortunately, we receive so many reports."

After the February 6, 2023, earthquake disaster, the disinformation spread that the Yarseli Dam in Hatay had cracked negatively affected the search and rescue operations in the region, and the disinformation achieved its goal. As a matter of fact, the fact that search and rescue personnel had to abandon their work and the disaster victims in the region tried to leave Hatay with panic and anxiety shows the negative consequences of this disinformation."

Discussion and Conclusion

Journalism requires being in contact with a large number of information sources and being in contact with authorized persons and institutions both at the scene of the incident and after the incident, which necessitates the continuous flow of information. In situations that affect the whole society, such as disasters, journalists have responsibilities both in the context of disaster management and in the context of the ethical principles of journalism. It is possible to argue that these responsibilities include preparing the society for disasters in pre-disaster periods, providing accurate information to disaster victims during disasters, conveying fast and accurate information about the current situation in the region, ensuring that the society has information about the disaster area, and announcing the needs in the disaster area to the public.

On February 6, 2023, when the disaster situation after the earthquakes occurred is evaluated, the extent of the disaster can be better understood considering that the earthquakes were the most severe in the history of the Republic of Turkey. In such a disaster situation, people's need for accurate information is much higher than at other times. However, in such situations, an atmosphere of fear and panic may arise, which leads to the spread of disinformation.

On February 6, 2023, when the disaster situation after the earthquakes occurred is evaluated, the extent of the disaster can be better understood considering that the earthquakes were the most severe in the history of the Republic of Turkey. In such a disaster situation, people's need for accurate information is much higher than at other times. However, in such situations, an atmosphere of fear and panic can arise, which leads to the spread of disinformation. As a matter of fact, the disinformation that the Yarseli Dam in Hatay had cracked was created in such an environment. Even though the police teams in the region, local administrative authorities, and members of parliament stated that the incident was disinformation, the social consequences of the disinformation could not be prevented, and social panic ensued.

In this study, the news production practice of journalists in times of disaster is analyzed through the statements of Oğuzhan Uğur, an official of Babala TV, which played a role in the spread of disinformation with a post made on social media after disinformation allegations came to the agenda following the post of the social media account named Babala TV.

When the case study of this study is examined, it is seen that the information received from a person who introduced himself as a ministry official stated that they had confirmed the information through his LinkedIn social media account and cited newspaper reports and the statements of the Malatya Governorship as a basis. It is widely known that information on social media can be easily changed, and profiles can be created for identity theft and impersonation. In this respect, the fact that the relevant institution accepts a social media profile as real without questioning its accuracy shows that it has incomplete knowledge in terms of media literacy. On the other hand, verification from at least two different sources is required to confirm the accuracy of the information. In this particular example, it is seen that a mistake was made in confirming the reliability of the source before confirming the information. The news source tried to be confirmed through a social media profile created on behalf of a person. It is not known whether official authorities were contacted to verify the identity of this person. On the other hand, there are also mistakes in verifying the information. First of all, it is not known whether any official was asked about this information. It is stated that independent news reports are accepted as confirmation.

Malatya Governorate announced that the Sultansuyu Dam within Malatya provincial borders was evacuated as a precautionary measure (Anadolu Agency, 2023). There is no official statement regarding the Yarseli Dam in Hatay. However, what is important for the subject of this report is the use of a social media account to confirm information. It was a highly problematic approach to attempt to verify the identity of the person who introduced himself as a ministry official on the phone, rather than the information he provided, and to get this confirmation through social media.

When individuals share information on social media as a result of carelessness, lack of knowledge, or poor media literacy and involuntarily contribute to the spread of disinformation, this can be characterized as misinformation. However, individuals and organizations active in social media in the context of journalism should not ignore the fact that their activities are in the public interest. Journalism is a profession that is based on the public's right to know and has responsibilities towards society. It is a profession that is open to anyone who wishes to express their thoughts and opinions and cannot be restricted by any license or permit.

Therefore, anyone who wants to express their thoughts and share accurate information with the public has the right to practice journalism. Journalism is closely linked to freedom of expression. However, people who want to practice journalism should not ignore the social responsibilities of their profession and should take into account the ethical values of journalism. As seen in this case, an organization engaged in journalism played a role in the spread of disinformation due to its negligence in the process of news verification. Although the officials of the relevant institution tried to characterize this disinformation as misinformation, disinformation was caused as a result of negligence since it was known in society as a media organization and not as an ordinary user on social media. In this context, the Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities of the Association of Journalists of Turkey emphasizes that journalists should not report news in a way that leads to distortion, misleading, and manipulation and should not write news with unconfirmed information, regardless of the form of publication (Association of Journalists of Turkey, 2019). Based on this case study, in the future, the speed of news transmission should not prevent the verification of the news, either in routine periods or in extraordinary situations affecting the entire society. Journalists' reporting in compliance with both national and international journalistic ethical codes will play an important role in preventing the spread of misinformation in society.

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