Crisis Messaging and Public Response During the 2025 Central Texas Flash Flood

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Introduction

- In July 2025, Central Texas experienced one of the deadliest flash floods in modern U.S. history, resulting in more than 130 fatalities and widespread disruption across the Hill country (CBS News, 2025).
- Despite the availability of meteorological forecasts and public alert systems, many residents failed to take timely protective action.
- Failures in crisis communication can create an action gap in which individuals receive warnings but struggle to interpret risk or act appropriately (Lindell & Perry, 2012).
- This study examines the effectiveness of 2025 Central Texas flood warnings in terms of **timeliness, clarity, and actionable instruction** during a rapid-onset disaster.

Theoretical Framework

CERC MODEL

(Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication)

1)Initial Phase
- Be First
- Be Right
- Promote Action(Actionability)

2. Evaluation Phase
- Analyzing Critiques of warning systems and
- Identifying Structural Constraints

Methodology

- Qualitative content analysis of newspaper coverage
- Articles collected from the NewsBank database
- Timeframe: June 27 – July 14, 2025
- Initial sample: 154 → Final sample: 27 Newspaper articles
- Deductive coding using the CERC framework.(Reynolds &Seeger,2012)

Findings

Initial Phase Recurring Theme

Timeliness Issues(BE First)
- ➢ Warnings were issued after flooding had already begun
- ➢ Forecasts underestimated severity
- ➢ Rapid onset reduced response time
- 👉 “Warnings were not frantic — until suddenly they were.”

Clarity Issues (Be Right)
- ➢ Inconsistent flood thresholds confused residents
- ➢ Technical language obscured real risk
- ➢ Messages often lacked urgency
- 👉 “Residents were uncertain how to interpret alerts.”

Actionability Issues (Promote Action)
- ➢ Alerts lacked clear instructions and evacuation guidance
- ➢ Normalcy bias slowed response
- 👉 “Life-threatening flooding” warnings arrived too late for action

System-Level Findings (Evaluation Phase)

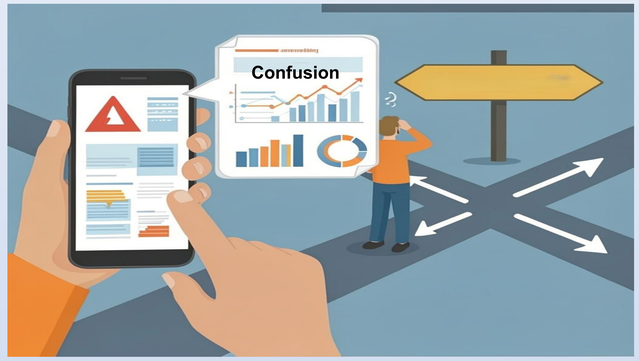
Infrastructure & Policy Gaps
- ➢ Underfunded warning systems
- ➢ Staffing shortages
- ➢ Legislative inaction

Alert Fatigue
- ➢ Frequent alerts led to disengagement
- ➢ Many residents disabled notifications
- 👉Nearly 30% of residents turned off alerts

Protocol Improvements & Message Design
- ➢ Clear, directive language can improve response
- ➢ Early and coordinated alerts increased effectiveness
- 👉 “Turn around, don’t drown.”

Conclusions

The Action Gap



- ✓ Ineffective flood warnings are not caused by a lack of hazard information, but by interdependent failures in message timing, clarity, and delivery reliability.
- ✓ Systematics constrain further weekend message credibility and public trust.

Implications

- ➢ **Standardize Language:** Use simple, directive phrases (e.g., "Turn around, don’t drown") to trigger immediate action.
- ➢ **Simplify Data:** Emergency managers must translate technical jargon into plain-language risk levels.
- ➢ **Fix the Delivery:** Investing in updated flood maps and faster alert sensors is required to close the "Action Gap.“
- ➢ **Build Trust:** Reliability and timeliness are the only ways to stop residents from disabling life-saving notifications.

Scan for more details

Information alone does not save lives; clear, timely, and directive communication is the bridge to safety.