

**Influence of the Emerging Information and Communication Technology Environment,
Media and Visibility on Government Decision Making Under Crisis**

Abstract

The political, economic, and social dimensions of the ongoing worldwide information revolution are yet to fully unfold and be understood in their entirety, along with their implications, particularly, for policy and governance. Decision making has been described as a “key human activity,” and its importance is highlighted in any crisis because of the wider implications. Crisis situations are unique in that the decision maker is faced with a threat to basic values, unprepared, under time pressure, while working with limited and unclear information. The emerging information and communication technology (ICT) environment and media bring the visibility factor to fore in present day crises, and influence government decision makers in both direct and indirect manner. Aside from some very general macrolevel observations, we do not yet have a comprehensive microlevel theory about this emerging phenomenon, incorporating causal forces and processes underlying observed behaviour.

Multiple perspectives have been found useful to understand organisational decision making. In this exploratory research, insights from diverse and contrasting disciplines are applied to unravel the complexities of government decision making under crisis in the emerging information environment context: behavioural decision theory and organisational decision making; experimental and social psychology; media studies, international relations and foreign policy decision making; and normative choice and descriptive models of decision making. Grounded theory research methodology, across multiple cases, is applied to operationalise this inductive research. Keeping the important concerns of the proposed research in focus, three recent crises faced by the Indian government are chosen for this study, where the decision makers were quite clearly confronted with a changed emerging ICT environment as the selected crises developed.

The research establishes the microlevel processes, which can be used to more fully explain the macrolevel influences of the emerging ICT environment on decision making and risk behaviour during crisis. We establish seven propositions, which relate these associations between significant categories/variables observed during the decision making process, reflecting the dynamics between the decision makers, crisis victims, relevant stakeholders, and the emerging media, in the environmental context. We find that decision-makers come with a set of past beliefs, experience, intrinsic character and individual motivations, which channelise their responses to socio-cognitive influences resulting from the nature of crisis coverage by the emerging media, and its wider perception and reactions amongst the stakeholders. Of significance are the findings with respect to:

(1) the nature of emerging media and its coverage of crises; (2) the process of formation of temporary stakeholder networks—their nature and motivation; (3) the “framing process” during the crisis by the decision-maker—its dynamic character and the underlying influences; (4) increased pressures and need for both pre- and post-hoc sensemaking and rationalisation; (5) the importance of self-esteem of the decision-maker, encompassing multiple facets, in resolving the crisis along a particular trajectory; and (6) the with-in decision making group dynamics under the influence of the “visibility” factor. These and some other important associations and behaviours thrown up in this research, e.g., a typology of dimensions of courage in decision makers during a crisis, touching upon ethics and morality of decision making during crisis, and a classification of observed risk-seeking behaviour of decision makers, on the basis of their underlying perceptions, can help public policy makers and leaders/managers to face up to the next crisis more competently.

The findings indicate that decision makers do not appear to be trying to optimise under constraints; instead, they exhibit some form of bounded rationality in decision making during a crisis. They are, first, more concerned about avoiding the strong negatives or value losses associated with a crisis; and, then, appear to follow certain “fast and frugal” heuristics, peculiar to the situation or an individual, to overcome/resolve the crisis. In the ongoing debate about decision “outcomes” against “process,” the emerging ICT environment brings to fore the importance of “signalling” and “sensemaking” roles of the decision makers, as well as the importance of the perception by the stakeholders about the decision making process per se, as against merely the final outcome.

We propose an integrated “emerging-environmental interactive feedback model” of crisis decision making (alternatively, the “emerging interactive feedback model” of crisis decision making). Alternative perspectives, e.g., symbolic-interpretivist and postmodern, help us to broaden our understanding of both the emerging environmental and the crisis context, and to better appreciate the meaning of the fundamentally revolutionary implications of the emerging ICT environment, which are thrown up starkly during a crisis.

Depending on the specific context and the decision makers’ response to the crisis, the emerging ICT environment, stakeholders and the media tend to influence the decision making process—ranging from “paralysing” to “galvanising,” and even “subverting,” at times. Finally, the research also provides a bridge between normative, descriptive, and prescriptive studies in the organisational decision making context.