


The use of social media in political crises: Lessons from Ecuador's government communication

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Abstract. Due to ongoing digital transformations, it is essential to continually review theories surrounding the effective use of social media in crisis communication. In the public sphere, academic literature on the use of these platforms to address political crises is less common than that related to natural disasters or health emergencies. Using the Government of Ecuador as a reference, this study aims to help close that research gap. To do so, a mixed and complementary methodology was employed. On one hand, it involved the analysis of two cases: the 2022 National Strike and the 2024 Internal Armed Conflict, focusing on X, Instagram, and TikTok. On the other hand, in-depth interviews were conducted with six communication managers who served in the Secretariat of Communication during the last two governments. The findings show that social media contributes to providing immediate responses, for continuous information flow, and narrative control during crises. These platforms are used to communicate government actions and to seek support for the political narrative. They are also useful for providing data that helps with decision-making. The study found that crisis strategy often depends on the president's vision, and that imagery enhances political leadership and fosters connection with citizens. As its main contribution, this research presents ten key practices for the effective use of social media in political crisis communication. These lessons focus on communication planning, initial crisis response, platform-specific strategies, and the role of image in crisis management.

Keywords. Crisis communication, political crisis, government communication, social media, in-depth interviews.

^{ES} El uso de las redes sociales en las crisis políticas. Aprendizajes de la comunicación gubernamental en Ecuador

Resumen. Debido a las continuas transformaciones digitales, se requiere revisar constantemente la teoría sobre el uso efectivo de las redes sociales en la comunicación de crisis. En la esfera pública, la literatura académica sobre el uso de los social media en la gestión de crisis políticas es menos común que aquella relacionada con desastres o emergencias sanitarias. Tomando al Gobierno del Ecuador como referencia, este trabajo busca contribuir a reducir esta brecha de investigación. Para ello, se utiliza una metodología mixta y complementaria. Por una parte, se estudiaron dos casos: el Paro Nacional de 2022 y el Conflicto Armado Interno de 2024, analizando X, Instagram y TikTok. Por otra parte, se realizaron entrevistas en profundidad con seis funcionarios de comunicación de los últimos dos gobiernos, cuatro de ellos ex secretarios de Comunicación. Los hallazgos muestran que las redes facilitan la respuesta inmediata, el flujo continuo de información y el control narrativo durante las crisis. Se usan estas plataformas para comunicar las acciones del Gobierno y para buscar apoyo hacia el relato político. También son útiles para ofrecer datos que ayudan en la toma de decisiones. Se encontró que la estrategia de comunicación de crisis suele depender de la visión del presidente y que la imagen puede fortalecer el liderazgo político en las crisis, así como ayudar a conectar con la ciudadanía. Como principal contribución, se presentan diez aprendizajes para el uso efectivo de las redes sociales en la comunicación de crisis políticas. Estas ideas cubren aspectos como la planificación, la respuesta inicial, el uso estratégico de plataformas y el rol de la imagen en la gestión de las crisis.

Palabras clave. Comunicación de crisis, crisis políticas, comunicación gubernamental, redes sociales, entrevistas en profundidad.

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1. Introduction

Academic literature regarding the use of social media in public crisis communication has increased in the last two decades (Cheng *et al.*, 2022) thanks to studies related to health emergencies and natural disasters. Together with these two categories, the political field completes the three areas of public crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2022). However, the political field is the one that receives less attention from academia (Lozano-Recalde, 2024) and so it hasn't been totally conceptualized (Auer, 2016).

In addition, research on the use of social media in crisis management has focused on the analysis of X and Facebook (Eriksson, 2018; Rasmussen & Ihlen, 2017). By not taking the same interest in other platforms, there is a risk of generalizing learning about social media, taking only one or two platforms as a reference. Also, as highlighted by Maier (2020), there is a scarcity of academic studies that analyze the impact of visual content in crisis communication. Investigating social media platforms focused on visual formats is one of the gaps in crisis communication research.

This study seeks to contribute to the academic literature on the use of social media in government crisis communication by analyzing the Government of Ecuador's communication. To this end, two different cases are taken as a reference: the 2022 National Strike and the 2024 Internal Armed Conflict (IAC). The first crisis involved protests that began on June 13, 2022, in several cities across the country, reflecting widespread discontent over the social and economic conditions under President Guillermo Lasso's administration. The uprising was convened by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), the country's most representative Indigenous organization. The crisis ended 18 days later with the signing of a peace agreement.

The second crisis consisted of a series of attacks that took place on January 8 and 9, 2024, in different cities, under Daniel Noboa's presidency. These acts were carried out by criminal groups linked to drug trafficking. Occurring within Ecuador's ongoing insecurity conflict since 2020, the attacks led to police and civilian deaths, kidnappings, injuries, and the seizure of a TV channel. The government classified the crisis as an internal armed conflict, thereby classifying these criminal groups as terrorist gangs. After some weeks, the crisis faded from the public agenda, although insecurity remained as the main concern of Ecuadorians (CEDATOS, 2024).

The analysis of these two cases is complemented by in-depth interviews with experts, former officials of the Secretariat of Communication of the Ecuadorian Presidency between 2015 and 2022. The aim is to compare the findings of the two cases with professionals' perspectives to obtain a more complete understanding of the processes of planning and responding to government crises.

2. Literature review

2.1. Communication and political leadership in government crises

Political leadership in public crises poses several challenges to authorities, such as the influence of affinity and ideology (Islm *et al.*, 2021), the

conflict between different political actors (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020) and the loss of control. Political leadership in crisis is exercised in a state of ignorance about what is happening, people's perception regarding the events and the reaction that other political actors will have (Boin *et al.*, 2021). In contrast, with other public emergencies, political crises pose challenges related to the influence of affinity and ideology (Islm *et al.*, 2021), the conflict between different political actors (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020) and the threat of losing power (Riorda, 2011). Auer (2016) suggests that political crises occur when a political actor generates a change that poses a vital threat to another actor, forcing the latter to respond within a narrow timeframe.

To manage these leadership processes, communication plays a key role. As Coombs (2015) states, it influences the initial response to the crisis, the dissemination of information as events unfold, engagement with citizens, and reputation management. In the political sphere, crisis communication must provide certainty in a naturally uncertain context and define the operational and political closure of the crisis (Riorda, 2011). While operational closure is linked to management, political closure depends on what is at stake in this type of crisis: the threat of loss of power (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). Confrontational crises (Lerbinger, 2012) occur when opposing actors engage in conflict for different demands, a common scenario in political crises.

To ensure consistency, authorities must shape meaning making in crisis management. Salomonsen and 't Hart (2020) describe this process as understanding what is happening, its causes, and assigning responsibility for the events. Strategic narratives play a key role in constructing shared meaning and serve as a means for political actors to shape behavior (Miskimmon *et al.*, 2012). To achieve this, narratives must explain the current situation, linking it to previous discourses, ideas, and images (Grigor & Panti, 2021). The struggle for controlling the narrative involves different actors within the political system, under what Frandsen and Johansen (2010) define as the rhetorical arena. In this scenario, communication tools such as framing and political rituals emerge. Framing involves selecting certain aspects of reality to shape perceptions about political issues (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). For Boin *et al.* (2009), effective frames inspire hope, convey empathy, and suggest that leaders are in control.

Likewise, to generate trust, authorities should get the initial response right. This allows the crisis team to reestablish a sense of control (Coombs, 2015) and define the tone with which events will be presented (Boin *et al.*, 2009). In this sense, the theory classifies crisis response strategies based on several factors. Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) proposes that a crisis response strategy depends largely on the level of responsibility attribution (2007). In the Interactive Crisis Communication (ICC) model, Cheng (2016) synthesizes the main theories and groups the responses into five strategies: base or informative, denial, evasion, justification, and concession.

While crises are presented as disruptive events, sometimes they can be a consequence of underlying conflicts. Riorda (2011) points out that there is a temporality understanding of crises that divides

them into chronic and acute. Chronic (McConnell, 2003) or long shadow crises (Boin *et al.*, 2009) are problems that have escalated to a point where they are intractable in the short term. Failure to intervene in these conflicts can occasionally trigger acute crises (Riorda, 2011), in which the focus is addressing the urgent, but not the root of the conflict. Crisis exploitation or crisis promotion (Bostdorff, 2022) is an opportunity to strengthen leadership and increase political support (Boin *et al.*, 2009) in a long-term crisis. This strategy could be successful if officeholders build trust by showing a clear direction of management (Schneider & Jordan, 2016). This requires a solid, coherent narrative throughout and after the crisis. Bostdorff (2022) highlights that presidents may be interested in promoting a crisis if it improves their chances of getting policies approved or increasing their credibility. However, misuse of crisis promotion can backfire if the narrative becomes inconsistent over time or if promises are broken.

2.2. Social media in government crisis communication

Crisis communication is effective when it is honest, fast, accurate and empathic (Cannaerts, 2020). In this process, social media has become a key element for crisis management. These platforms enable communication without intermediaries, provide real-time information, and allow the identification of people's perceptions, concerns, and needs in crises (Wan & Paris, 2014). While it has not replaced the work of traditional media, as Jin *et al.*, (2022) note, social media is currently a dominant force in crisis communication studies and practice.

Social media also presents challenges for crisis management, including the loss of informational control, rumors, misinformation (Suau-Gomila *et al.*, 2017), and the overexposure of authorities to public scrutiny (Watson & Firth, 2022). Nevertheless, research offers several recommendations for the effective use of social media during crises. According to Maal and Wilson-North (2019), dialogue with audiences and seeking trust must be the two priorities. Some theories support the idea of a user centered strategy (Austin & Jin, 2016; Stewart & Wilson, 2016).

Other studies demonstrate a positive link between immediacy and transparency and the perception of honesty (Zheng, 2023). To reinforce trust, Pulido-Polo *et al.*, (2021) propose information dripping, that is, frequently updating information about the crisis. Emotional content is also helpful because it humanizes management, shows empathy, and complements information (Zhu & Hu, 2023).

Another recommended practice is to monitor online conversations and use this information strategically. Monitoring helps identify citizens' needs and craft messages that respond to what people want to know (Cannaerts, 2020). This analysis is also useful for measuring the impact of crisis messaging and for identifying and refuting misinformation. Sentiment analysis, in turn, is helpful for identifying segments of the population on which communication efforts should be focused during emergencies (Ragini *et al.*, 2018).

Social media allows practitioners to adapt messages to different formats. It is recommended to

understand and exploit the specific features of each platform to adapt messages to the ideal format for each case (Cannaerts, 2020). Likewise, combining communication resources, such as text with images or videos, often improves the effectiveness of the message and avoids information overload (Liu *et al.*, 2016; Suau-Gomila *et al.*, 2022). Content richness can help strengthen the political narrative in a crisis. Richer formats are useful for building shared meanings, especially when used to communicate positive actions (Chen *et al.*, 2020).

In recent years, social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok have shifted toward video-based content (Li & Xie, 2019), reshaping the language of posts. These platforms produce more meaningful interactions with users, especially based on the emotional factor (Stimpson *et al.*, 2025). In public crises, visual content can help to quickly create a collective understanding of the seriousness of the situation. Images serve as a tool for citizens to corroborate what is being said about the crisis and feel informed about what is happening (Janoske, 2018). Additionally, visuals tied to human stories enhance engagement (Maier, 2020) and reinforce crisis narratives (Bostdorff, 2022).

The strategic use of image can be key to positioning political leadership (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2017), as well as to help visualize the progress of results during crisis management. In their study on the use of images on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, He *et al.*, (2024) identified four visual strategies in crisis communication: images as visual-based information enhancement, evidence to improve credibility, signs of authority and triggers for empathy. The appropriate use of these strategies strengthens crisis communication because it enriches messages in the intended direction.

3. Objectives and methodology

The overall objective of this paper is to analyze, from a mixed and comparative perspective, the use of social media in crisis communication by the Ecuadorian government, and to propose recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the management of these platforms during crisis. As specific objectives, this work proposes: a) To describe the role that social media messages of the Government of Ecuador played in communicating the 2022 National Strike and the 2024 IAC; b) To understand how the Government of Ecuador manages social media during crisis communication processes, based on the opinions of former officials from the Communications Secretariat; and c) To propose recommendations to improve the effectiveness of crisis communication in governments using social media.

To address these objectives a dual methodology was implemented. It combined content analysis of two crisis faced by the Ecuadorian government: the 2022 National Strike and the 2024 IAC, with in-depth interviews with six communications managers, former government officials in the last two administrations (2017-2023). The two crises were selected for their social and institutional relevance, in the sense that they paralyzed the population's work and commercial activities for days and threatened the authority of the government.

Table 1. Sample collection process for analysis.

National Strike 2022	Internal Armed Conflict 2024
Sample period: June 13 to July 5, 2022	Sample period: January 8 to March 7, 2024
Number of posts extracted from @presidenciaec y @comunicacion.ec	
N=589 (Instagram=252 X=337)	N=381 (Instagram=220 TikTok=121)
Removing duplicate posts	
N=44 (Instagram=32 X=12)	N=17 (Instagram=2 TikTok=15)
Deleting posts that are irrelevant to the matter of the study	
N=56 (Instagram=26 X=30)	N=149 (Instagram=98 TikTok=51)
Final sample	
N=489 (Instagram=194 X=295)	N=215 (Instagram=120 TikTok=95)

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 2. Criteria for content analysis.

Category	Variable	Classification	References
Narrative	Political appeal	Opposition Previous governments Congress Other actors	Angulo Moncayo <i>et al.</i> , (2018)
	Framing	Conflict Human interest Economic consequences Morality Responsibility	Semetko & Valkenburg (2000)
	Function in the meaning-making process	Explains the facts Explains causes or reasons for the crisis Proposes possible repercussions Offers solutions None	Boin <i>et al.</i> , (2009)
Crisis communication	Post objective	Give information on government actions Clarify or correct misinformation Connect users with aid sources Share citizen testimonies or stories Call to action/seek support Condemn actions of other actors	Liu <i>et al.</i> , (2020)
	Response strategy	Informative: Provide information to the population and how to protect themselves Denial: Refuse to acknowledge the crisis; attribute responsibility to a third party Evasion: Claim inability to prevent the crisis; blame others; minimize severity Justification: Highlight positive government actions; victimization Concession: Accept responsibility; compensate victims; measures to prevent recurrence	Coombs (2007) Cheng (2016) Holladay (2009)
Image and social media format	Content format	Text Link Single image Carousel/multiple images Video Hashtag	Quevedo-Redondo & Portalés-Oliva, 2017; Lalancette & Raynauld (2019)
	Image protagonism	President Government authorities Security forces Citizens Other/unspecified	Quevedo & Portalés-Oliva, 2017; Lalancette & Raynauld (2019)
	Management scenario	Institutional Media Military Citizen Unspecified	Tirado-García & Doménech-Fabregat (2019)
	Visual strategy	Informational enhancement Credibility source Sign of authority Trigger for empathy	He <i>et al.</i> , (2024)

Source: own elaboration.

For content analysis, posts from the social media accounts of the Presidency and the Government Communications Secretariat were sampled. Networks were selected based on the highest growth during each crisis (Del Alcázar, 2022; 2023). X and Instagram for the first, Instagram and TikTok for the second. For the 2022 National Strike, the sample was extracted using Crowdtangle for Instagram and Phantombuster for X. For the Internal Armed Conflict, Apify was used for both Instagram and TikTok. The periods varied according to the specifics of each case, covering each crisis from its outbreak. Table 1 details the sample selection.

As suggested by Bardin (1991) in terms of incorporating systematic and objective procedures to describe the messages, certain criteria related to the objectives of this study were established for the analysis of the sample. The selection of these variables was made by using other studies as a reference such as those by He *et al.*, (2024), Liu *et al.*, (2020) or Quevedo-Redondo and Portalés-Oliva (2017), among others. The selected criteria were narrative, crisis response strategy, and social media message characteristics. Table 2 details these variables.

Content analysis was complemented with semi-structured in-depth interviews. This type of interview allows for greater versatility, encouraging discussion while also adapting the conversation based on the feedback provided by the participants (Tracy, 2020). Four of the interviewees were former directors of government communications and the other two held senior roles in the digital communications branch. These profiles were chosen to reach the highest-level candidates and to prioritize interview quality over quantity. In this way, top government communication officials, as well as digital and social media experts, were considered. The participants were:

- P1. Eduardo Bonilla: Secretary of Communication (2021-2022)
- P2. Wendy Reyes: Secretary of Communication (2023)
- P3. Gustavo Isch: Secretary of Communication (2021)
- P4. Caridad Vela: Secretary of Communication (2020-2021)
- P5. Briana Villao: Director of Digital Government Communication and Coverage (2021-2022)
- P6. Jorge Fernández: Digital Communication Analyst (2021-2022)

Following the planning process recommendations proposed by Amezcua (2015), the interviews were conducted in online format between December 2024 and March 2025. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was recorded via Google Meet. The conversations were transcribed using TurboScribe and then reviewed to ensure transcript reliability. The responses were coded and analyzed using ATLAS.ti, following a process like the one used in Tulloch *et al.* (2024). To facilitate a thematic classification of the

findings, elements of interest were grouped into broad categories. The interviews were then reread to look for information possibly discarded in the initial review. Certain excerpts from the interviews were selected to exemplify the arguments detailed in the results.

4. Results

4.1. Case studies

4.1.1. Meaning making

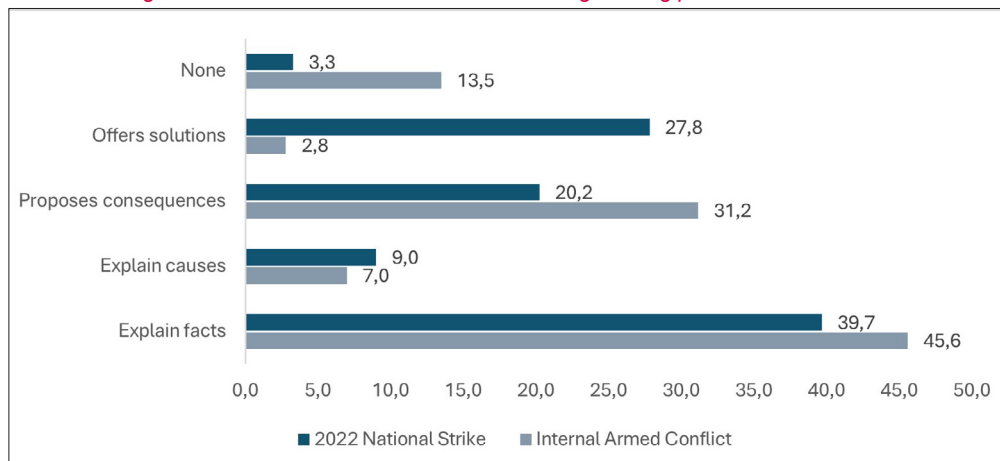
When analyzing the role social media played in constructing the government's narrative regarding the 2022 National Strike, it was found that the crisis's main framing was human interest. A total of 26.4% of the posts had this focus. The explanation was that the protests were affecting people, both through acts of vandalism and the interruption of commercial activities. Also, 20% of the messages were framed in terms of economic consequences, stating that the crisis was affecting productive and commercial reactivation. Despite being a confrontation crisis, only 18.8% of posts involved references to CONAIE or other political actors.

On the other hand, in the 2024 IAC Noboa's government framed the crisis as a conflict. A total of 50.7% of Instagram and TikTok posts had this frame. The argument was an us vs them clash, that is, the nation against criminal groups linked to drug trafficking. In 32.1% of posts, the crisis was framed as a matter of human interest, indicating it affected the personal safety of people. This framing was slightly more prominent on TikTok, at 36.8%, while on Instagram it was 28.3%.

As shown in Figure 1, the meaning-making process in both crises, social media contributed to narrative with two main functions: explaining the facts and offering solutions. This percentages were 40.9% and 27.8%, respectively, in the National Strike, and 45.6% and 31.2% in the insecurity crisis. As solutions, during the National Strike the Government suggested dialogue to end the crisis and reach a mutual agreement with CONAIE. In 20.2% of cases, the function was to raise possible consequences. They were presented primarily in economic terms, initially negatively, but later positively. That is, the reasons behind the protests were initially exposed as an impediment to economic recovery, but, with the peace agreement, the results were shown as a benefit for people's economy and the agricultural sector.

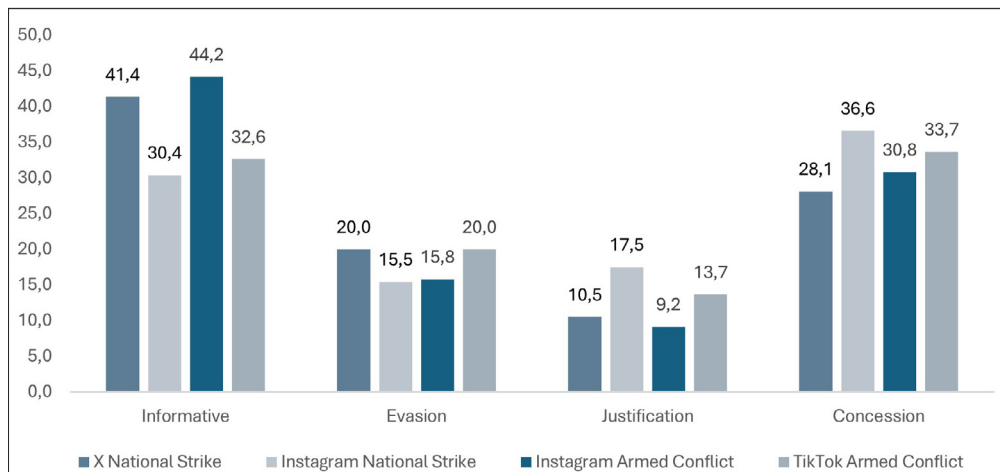
In the IAC, the government proposed solution was strengthening the Military and Police. This was seen with posts suggesting new policies, the call for a referendum to reform security laws, and the proposal of increasing VAT by three percentage points, from 12% to 15%, to allocate more financial resources to security. After the first 20 days following the outbreak of the events, crisis communication began to lose ground compared to routine government communication, without any real closure to the crisis being declared. Additionally, 84.2% of posts did not contain political allusions.

Figure 1. The use of social media in the meaning-making process of each crisis.



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 2. Response strategies on each platform: 2022 National Strike vs IAC.



Source: Own elaboration.

4.1.2. Crisis communication strategy

In both cases, the main objective of social media posts was to provide information about the management of the crisis, accounting for 36.4% of the messages in the National Strike and 46.5% in the IAC. Secondly, posts were published to seek citizen support towards the government's narrative, accounting for 22.1% in the first crisis and 25% in the second case. Furthermore, in the National Strike, 16.6% of posts were intended to clarify or correct information, while in 14.5% of cases, social media was used to condemn CONAIE's and protesters' behaviors. In the insecurity crisis, a complementary social media posting objective was to share citizen stories 15.3%. The objective of clarifying misinformation made 7.4% of the messages, while posts intended to condemn opposition's actions were scarce. Comparing the use of X and Instagram, slight differences were

found. While X was more informative, Instagram emphasized storytelling from citizens that were suffering the effects of the crisis.

Post objectives coincided with the analysis of the response strategy, as proposed by Cheng (2016). The main strategy in both crises was to respond informatively, as seen in 37% of the messages of the National Strike and 41.1% of the IAC. In the first case, 31.5% of the messages expressed an intention to concede, as the government accepted certain responsibility for the situation by compensating victims or responding to CONAIE demands. To a lesser extent, evasion and justification were used, with 18.2% and 13.3%, respectively. It was seen that X stood out for being more informative, with 41.4% of cases, while Instagram played a significant role in concession. A total of 36.6% of Instagram posts received this type of response.

During the insecurity crisis, beyond responding informatively, concession represented 32.1% of the messages. Evasion accounted for 17.7% of cases, while justification was used in 11.2% of the posts. Informative response was more prevalent on Instagram, with 44.2%, while on TikTok it was 32.6%. The remaining strategies had greater weight on TikTok. The greatest difference was found in the comparison of the evasion strategy, used in the 20% of TikTok posts, compared to 15.8% on Instagram. Figure 2 shows a comparison between the response strategies of each crisis.

4.1.3. Characteristics of Image and social media message

The third variable evaluated image and the elaboration of the message on social media. The analysis identified video as the main content format for posting, with 43.8% of cases during the National Strike. That represented 54.6% of posts on Instagram and 36.5% on X. Single image was used in 33.5% of the cases, 35.8% of X and 29.9% on Instagram. Additionally, 46% of posts used at least three communication elements, reflecting content richness, and 66.3% of posts included a hashtag. The most frequently employed hashtags were #WeCan'tStop (40.7%), #EcuadorWantsPeace (22.7%), and #DialoguelsTheBestWayOut (9.4%).

In the case of the IAC, all TikTok posts were videos, while on Instagram this format was used 80% of the time. A total of 13.3% of the content format of the latter was multiple images and 6.7%, a single image. Furthermore, 87.4% of posts included a hashtag. The most frequently used hashtag was #theNewEcuador, in 70.5% of cases. #TogetherAgainstTerrorism was used 55% of the time, and #IContributeForPeace, 22%. No significant differences were found in hashtag use across platforms.

Regarding image, protagonism, the scenario and visual strategy (He *et al.*, 2024) were considered. During the National Strike, Citizens were seen as the main figures of social media communication, with common people as protagonists in 24% of social

media content. President Guillermo Lasso was the protagonist in 20% of posts, and other government officials, 15%. Regarding the scenario of this crisis, it was primarily citizen and institutional, with 26.2% and 21%, respectively. The media scenario accounted for 10.1% of cases

In the analysis of the IAC, it was found that the protagonism fell on the president, in 40.8% of the posts. The Military and citizens followed with similar prominence, with 22.5% and 22%, respectively. Crisis scenario analysis revealed a balanced use of settings. Military and citizen environments appeared in 21.4% of posts, media in 19.1% and institutional scenario in 18.6%.

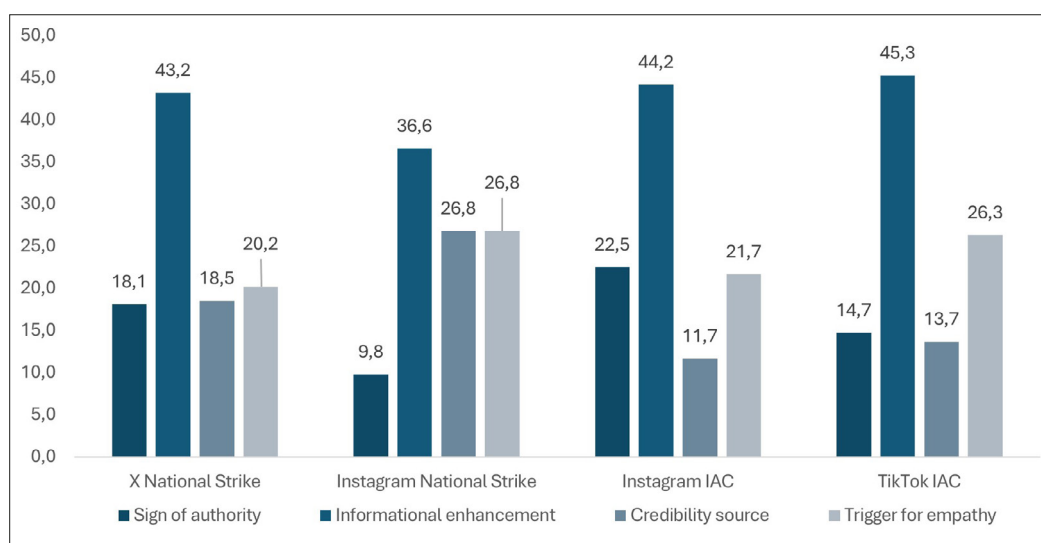
Concerning the visual strategy, images and videos were primarily used to enhance informational efforts, as shown in Figure 3. During the National Strike, 40.3% of visual content served this purpose, while in the IAC, the figure was 44.7%. Images were used to trigger empathy in 26.8% of cases during the first crisis and 23.7% in the second. When comparing platforms in the National Strike, it was found that on X, image was used significantly as a sign of authority, with 18.1%, while on Instagram this it was 9.8%. During the IAC, TikTok was more used for triggering empathy and for reinforcing information than Instagram, while less used as a sign of authority. Instagram showed mixed results, representing a more balanced use of images across both crises.

4.2. Managers interviews

4.2.1. Benefits of social media in government crisis communication

In the interviews, there was unanimity regarding the essential role of social media in crisis management. Managers emphasized that social media allows information to reach a significant amount of the population directly. It is necessary to "use all possible channels to communicate your message" (P2), and the digital sphere is perhaps more important than traditional media nowadays.

Figure 3. Visual strategy on social media crisis communication: 2022 National Strike vs IAC.



Source: Own elaboration.

Experts highlighted the importance of social listening during crises. For P4 monitoring is key for early detection of threats. P4 and P6 agreed that measuring mentions, user sentiment and engagement help authorities to make the right decisions. P1 recommended establishing a daily traffic light system that categorizes threats by severity. P6 added that monitoring is also useful for identifying favorable topics during a crisis, “so we also continue reporting on these issues”. Managers agreed on the importance of triangulating social listening with polls and media clipping and, if possible, hiring external experts on digital analytics.

Managers said that social media helps in the first response to crises, as it is easier to quickly report facts and debunk rumors or misinformation. “It is a channel where you can provide official information, which people and media take, forward, and share,” P1. Interviewees agreed that messages should be as clear, simple, and compelling as possible. For P2, the initial message should answer the most important question: “what is happening?”, and communicate facts, because “the worst thing you can do in a crisis is communicate intentions”. P3 said that it is important to be honest about what is known and share as quickly as possible what will be done to solve the crisis.

Managers also noted social media’s function as a channel for citizen support during crises. According to P4, this is an important aspect to restore trust in authorities. P2 emphasized that the government’s channels are at the service of citizens, so social media should be focused on helping people. P5 and P6 were skeptical about this idea. P5 said that guidelines to answer users’ messages during crises are often limited to helping victims. For other issues, it is recommended not to risk responding incorrectly, as this could lead to secondary crises.

4.2.2. The role of social media in the crisis narrative and engagement

Social media is also used to strengthen narrative and political leadership in a crisis. According to P1, crisis narrative should come from the political vision of the government and the president. From there, communication is configured in two directions: informative and persuasive. In this process of convergence, social media plays a leading role due to its ability to generate emotions. “If you only inform, you probably won’t connect with people, because it is emotion that makes them assimilate what you’re telling them” (P1).

Similarly, experts mentioned that social media challenges narrative control in crises. “If you don’t tell your version of the events, others will tell it for you,” (P2). Likewise, P4 highlighted the importance of looking for allied voices in the digital sphere to reinforce the narrative in situations “that can become uncontrollable”: “you need allied voices who are sources of credibility and get them to speak publicly”. Moreover, the lack of a narrative leads to reactive communication. “If the government focuses too much on tactics and doesn’t have a defined and clear narrative, it will just end up responding to issues and putting out fires” (P6).

To achieve a strategic narrative on social media, P5 explained that the digital team plan content

based on the government’s main lines on the crisis. The goal is to publish in an organized manner, trying to adapt information into attractive posts that are easy to understand. According to P6, the aim is to “citizenize” the government’s message with non-technical content: “That is, say, okay, how would a common citizen understand this message, and even replicate it in their own words?” P5 highlighted that approximately 25% of posts during a crisis tend to be planned. The remaining 75% are usually situational, as they depend on how events unfold.

Managers also emphasized that content format variations can reinforce information and political narrative. P5 mentioned that hashtags are effective in reinforcing the message because it’s a type of language that provides context and is perceived as natural in the social media environment. “The way I did it with my team, it was mostly to accompany the narrative. Two or three would be proposed, and the one that received approval would be used” (P5). Similarly, P6 said that emojis can help improve understanding of messages by bringing order to ideas and avoiding visual fatigue of text.

Additionally, managers pointed out the importance of using each social media platform distinctively because “people use the network for different purposes and perceive each channel differently” (P5). Experts agreed that X is the main network for political issues. Many crises are managed only through this platform, due to its ability to generate political agenda and mediatic issues. For P1, it’s easier to position political ideas on X due to the audience’s interest and because ideas are expressed more quickly in text format. Similarly, media and journalists use information from X to generate news. “Only by sending a message through this channel these actors could replicate that echo on other platforms” (P6).

For P5, communication should migrate to other networks when it’s necessary to speak directly to citizens. This is the case with Instagram and TikTok, where the audiovisual format is the protagonist. According to P1, on these platforms it is important to present stories in a positive tone and seek to generate an emotional connection. P5 mentioned that “on these platforms, people like to be spoken to, as if they were being spoken to directly”. To achieve this closeness, P5 and P6 recommend citizen storytelling to explain crisis events.

Managers highlighted TikTok’s ability to make content go viral, because it is easily shared on other platforms and through WhatsApp. Regarding Facebook, they mentioned its value for publishing photos and chronicling crisis management in a more informal way than on X. For P1, YouTube is useful to dig deeper into the content, sharing full interviews, reports, and press conferences for users who are more implicated in the crisis.

4.2.3. The value of image in crisis management

The use of visual content depends on the crisis communication strategy. When defining how to communicate, “the next thing is, who is the spokesperson that needs to come forward?” (P2). Managers identified trust-building and the reinforcement of political

leadership as key opportunities offered by effective visual use in crisis management. “It helps give a face to the government, so people can see who it is are they are trusting to solve the crisis. Having faces is always a factor of trust” (P1).

Visuals can also help build leadership by presenting the spokesperson as a close, empathetic and energetic person. To achieve this, authorities can be shown on the field where the crisis is happening. However, misuse of imagery can undermine message control. P3 noted the risks of showing a leader in areas where the government is unpopular, as this can provoke rejection that’s reflected in the visuals. Moreover, the image must be consistent with the narrative. P4 and P5 agreed on the importance of always showing the leader surrounded by people. This must be accompanied by aesthetic considerations, such as clothing and posture.

Likewise, images are useful as an informative reinforcement on social media. “The content of the message is super important, but the first thing people see is the form” (P3). According to P6, “citizens consume images much more than written text.” For this reason, some of the experts agreed that certain topics are easier to explain through audiovisual resources, such as reels or infographics. Similarly, the use of video allows “citizens to speak to other citizens,” (P6), aiming to increase credibility around the government’s stance during a crisis.

4.2.4. Challenges in crisis communication

Professionals agreed that the main disadvantages of social media revolve around misinformation and loss of control of the crisis conversation. For P1 and P3, one of the problems with misinformation is that it is usually negative news, and that “people generally tend to consume more sensational or negative content than the positive things” (P1). Also, experts indicated that due to the power of anonymity social media is a space prone to confrontation and conflict.

For P3 and P4, the underlying issue is that these platforms distort reality, whether through fake accounts, the participation of troll centers, or the use of artificial intelligence in content creation. These factors contribute to the polarization of discourse, as the truth is no longer the priority. Instead, “people need to reinforce their own beliefs, it’s emotional” (P3). Additionally, Villao noted that when this content migrates to WhatsApp, “control is lost, not only over the narrative but also over impact metrics”.

Another disadvantage mentioned was the “culture of interaction” (P6). For P3 and P4, there are actors in the digital sphere who intervene in crises with the unique purpose of getting attention and creating controversy. They are not political actors, but they contribute to alternative narratives. “What gives someone a voice on social media isn’t their knowledge of the topic, but their number of followers” (P4). For P5, this culture of interaction prioritizes entertainment over political analysis. People do “not question what’s happening” (P5), instead, they keep a simple and biased idea seen in a post.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The results matched much of the cited literature, for example, Coombs (2007) or Cannaerts (2020)

theories on response strategies, He *et al.*, (2024) visual strategies or the research on leadership and political narrative during crises (Boin *et al.*, 2009; Bostdorff, 2022). It was found that social media contributes to reporting what is happening and what authorities are doing to solve the problem. The Ecuadorian government worked to announce crisis closure as soon as possible in both cases analyzed (Riorda, 2011). In the 2022 National Strike, the proposed closure was dialogue, while in the 2024 IAC, it was to strengthen the security forces.

Narrative is a central element of political crisis communication. As Bonilla pointed out, the strategy has two branches: informing and persuading. The latter has a direct relation with political narrative, which basically explains the government’s understanding of the crisis. This narrative will be more convincing if it is anchored in a previous political vision (Grigor & Panit, 2021). Social media can be useful for presenting crises within a specific framework, such as human interest, in the 2022 National Strike, or conflict, in the IAC. Experts agreed that balancing both functions of informing and persuading is key to leading the crisis conversation while generating trust.

This diversification of different social media platforms enables messages to be tailored to specific audiences in the appropriate language. Case analyses revealed that X was primarily used for informative purposes, as corroborated by experts, who noted that this is the platform where climates of opinion tend to form, as also discussed by Herbst (2011). On Instagram and TikTok, the focus is on creating emotional connections and speaking directly to citizens (Stimpson *et al.*, 2025). These platforms aim to build public support for the government’s position during the crisis through citizen engagement. However, content analysis showed that Instagram is used in a notably balanced way, combining both the goal of informing and fostering emotional engagement. While video content predominated social media crisis communication, single images were almost equally prominent on X. As Fernández and Bonilla noted, X typically makes it easier explain difficult ideas, as well as to attract media attention to issues of interest to the authorities. Additionally, the use of hashtags was shown to play a role in framing the crisis according to the government’s narrative and in a language that feels natural within the context of social media.

Regarding visual content, it was found to be used primarily to enhance the dissemination of information and, to a lesser extent, to evoke empathy. These results align with the findings of He *et al.*, (2024) in their study on health crises. Experts emphasized that images facilitate emotional connection and trust-building by creating a sense of closeness between leaders and citizens, while also helping to communicate the actions being taken to resolve the crisis. In both crises analyzed, the president played a central role, acting as the main spokesperson. Citizens also played an important role in visual content, helping to translate official messages into the words of ordinary people, a tactic commonly used on Instagram and TikTok, according to the managers.

There were some differences between the cases that could be attributed to the specific nature of each crisis and the political situation. The 2022 National Strike was a confrontational crisis (Lerbinger, 2012)

in which the government was a main actor and assumed responsibility through a concession strategy in many messages. In this case, the unfolding and closure of the crisis were clearly defined and shared in the narrative. In contrast, the 2024 IAC exhibited characteristics of a chronic (McConnell, 2003) and long-shadow crisis (Boin *et al.*, 2009), with low responsibility attributed to the government. In the latter case, contrary to Riorda (2011) the government did not set deadlines for resolving the crisis. Instead, the IAC became a key pillar of government communication, and it was used to promote new policies and laws in the following months, consistent with the exploitation or promotion strategy (Boin *et al.*, 2009; Bostdorff, 2022).

Certain inconsistencies emerged between theory, cases analysis and interviews findings. Contrary to studies such as Pont-Sorribes *et al.*, (2020), which suggest having guidelines for social media crisis communication, interviews revealed that the Ecuadorian government lacks a pre-established plan for responding to crises, both in general and on social media. The response is not based on crisis communication theories or models, but rather on the president's leadership and political vision, as well as the managers' experience and intuition. However, research data from social media remains important when assessing the crisis, elaborating messages and measuring results.

While it was stated that narrative should follow political vision, some contradictions were found in the government's storytelling of the National Strike crisis. Additionally, although experts attributed a distinctive use to each platform, the analysis of the security crisis revealed that TikTok was used to replicate content posted on Instagram, revealing a lack of strategy on this network. Moreover, the use of the president's image during the 2022 National Strike portrayed him as leading from an institutional setting. According to previous literature (Bostdorff, 2022; Maier, 2020), this could be considered a mistake, as it might convey a sense of distance from the situation that people were experiencing.

A compilation of 10 good practices of government crisis communication on social media is proposed as a synthesis of the results of this study. These recommendations emerge from the reviewed theory, both case studies analysis, and interviews with former managers:

1. Monitor social media before, during, and after the crisis: analyze trends, mentions, users' sentiment and main actors. Complement the findings with polls and media clipping.
2. Look for advice from external experts in digital analytics and set up training sessions with teams to simulate crisis scenarios.
3. To ensure agility and minimize errors, governments should design a social media guide for crisis communication. This document should include the government's vision, roles and responsibilities, recommendations on the proper use of platforms, policies for responding to users, and ethical guidelines.
4. Plan a social media strategy considering the two branches of political crisis

communication: informational and persuasive. The informational strategy should be based on crisis communication theories, while the persuasive should align with the government's political narrative.

5. Create a content plan with 25% to 30% of posts that could be used in a timeless manner, leaving 70% to 75% for real-time responses based on the events. This strategy will facilitate informational dripping during the crisis.
6. Start by responding first on X and then go to other platforms. Alongside X, Facebook can support informational efforts from a more informal perspective.
7. Use Instagram and TikTok to connect with citizens and create content that is easy to understand and share. Links, stories, and live streams can be leveraged to enhance engagement and empathy and provide real-time information.
8. Benefit from social media natural features, such as hashtags, that can help frame the crisis and be used across platforms. Emojis can enhance clarity, and links are effective in directing interested audiences to more detailed content on websites or YouTube.
9. Visual content plays a fundamental role in enhancing information, creating a crisis collective understanding aligned to the government's vision and reinforcing political leadership.
10. Creating a WhatsApp channel could be useful for reinforcing communication efforts. This one-way channel could serve to deliver messages about the evolution of the crisis to authorities, journalists and citizens.

This study has some limitations, such as its circumstantial nature. The Ecuadorian government was used as a reference, and conclusions are based on this perspective. Considering the messages of other political actors during both crises could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of the different narratives surrounding crisis communication. Similarly, opinions from other communications experts could have offered a richer perspective on the common practices of government managers. Social media metrics and the analysis of users' comments could have also been included to compare the effectiveness of posts. Additionally, comparing these findings with studies in other political contexts and different crises typologies would be helpful.

For a more accurate understanding of effective strategies and practices in social media during crisis communication, it is important to integrate different methodological tools. Further research could analyze crisis cases using other methodologies that help measure perception of the practices recommended in this study, especially among people that use social media as a news source. Similarly, academia is urged to collaborate more with the professional sector to achieve a better understanding of the current problems and opportunities surrounding government communication.

6. Statement on the use of artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence has not been used in this article.

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