

Crisis Communications and Social Media: Advantages, Disadvantages and Best Practices

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### **Abstract**

With new environmental developments and terrorism breeding opportunities for crises, and media proliferation and advancement increasing exposure to crises, organizations have placed a higher premium on crisis management (Coombs, 1999). Through a thorough literature review, the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how crisis communications is important today now more than ever with media (traditional and new) increasing the exposure of the crises, and new media – particularly social media – adding to and creating this exposure. The paper takes a broad view of crisis communications by examining the varying definitions of crisis and crisis communications, as well as highlighting a few related crisis communication functions, strategies, models and theories. Within this overview will be a concentration on the positive and negative impact of social media on the practice of crisis communications. This paper will explore how social media can help the practice by supplying stakeholders with a ready resource to make sense of a crisis, and by creating a way to share integral, time-sensitive information quickly to citizens and crisis managers and communicators. By the same token, social media can hinder organizations' crisis communications by spreading misinformation at rapid speed. Also, not everyone using social media has the best intentions – they may use it to harm an organization thereby potentially creating a crisis for both the organization and those stakeholders who bear the risk.

**Keywords:** Crisis Communication, Social Media, Risk Communication

## **Crisis Communications and Social Media: Advantages, Disadvantages and Best Practices**

With new environmental developments and terrorism breeding opportunities for crises, and media proliferation and advancement increasing exposure to crises, organizations have placed a higher premium on crisis management (Coombs, 1999). Vital to successful crisis management is strategic and effective crisis communications. Without it the health and safety of its stakeholders and the reputation of an organization are at risk. "What an organization chooses to say affects how the public perceives both the crisis and focal organization" (Stephens & Malone, 2009, p. 231).

As Coombs (1999) simply stated, no organization is immune to a crisis. A crisis can arise from inside or outside the organization, and, according to Reynolds (2006), "the moment it occurs, lives may be at risk and the reputation of a company or organization may also be at risk. The ability to communicate well with people who have a stake in the event may determine whether lives are saved and the organization emerges with its good reputation intact" (p. 249). In fact, Penrose (2000) found that while large companies with ample financial resources may have a chance of survival following a crisis without a crisis plan, 80 percent of smaller, lesser-known companies without a comprehensive crisis plan vanish within two years of suffering a major disaster.

Competing with 24-hour news cycles, social media and mobile technology, crisis communicators are under pressure now more than ever to fill the information void. As Malone and Coombs (2009) said, "Crises in recent years are impacting people globally. With new developments in technology, people around the world are able to watch as a major disaster unfolds. As a result, expectations are now extremely high as to how organizations respond to a crisis and communicate throughout the course of a crisis" (p. 121). Weiner (2006) painted the

picture of how a crisis can escalate in the age of new media, "Before the company knows about the incident, cameras are on the scene. In the absence of real information, an organization cannot respond meaningfully. However, that doesn't stop the media from reporting on it live, minute by minute" (p. 1). Furthermore, stakeholders on the ground are now citizen journalists aided by social media via mobile technology.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how crisis communications is important today now more than ever with media (traditional and new) proliferation increasing the exposure of the crises, and new media – particularly social media – adding to and creating this exposure. The paper takes a broad view of crisis communications by examining the varying definitions of crisis and crisis communications, as well as highlighting a few related crisis communication functions, strategies, models and theories. Within this overview will be a concentration on the positive and negative impact of social media on the practice of crisis communications. This paper will explore how social media can help the practice by supplying stakeholders with a ready resource to make sense of a crisis, and by creating a way to share integral, time-sensitive information quickly to citizens and crisis managers and communicators. By the same token, social media can hinder organizations' crisis communications by spreading misinformation at rapid speed. Also, not everyone using social media has the best intentions – they may use it to harm an organization thereby potentially creating a crisis for both the organization and those stakeholders who bear the risk.

### **Crisis and Crisis Types**

While the importance of crisis communications is widely agreed upon, the definition of a crisis is not. Heath (2006) said to define crisis, you must first define risk. According to Heath, risk is an occurrence that can have positive or negative consequences of varying magnitudes, the

occurrence of which and the effects of which can be variously predicted, controlled, and harmful or beneficial. In this context, a crisis is a risk manifested. Coombs' (1999) definition goes a bit further, defining crisis as "an event that is an unpredictable, major threat that can have a negative effect on the organization, industry, or stakeholders if handled improperly" (p. 2).

Similar to risk, some view crisis as a turning point. According to Martinelli and Briggs (1998), "A crisis can be seen as an opportunity to demonstrate the organization's commitment to responsible behavior and to outline the steps being taken to eliminate the problem" (p. 44).

Pearson and Clair (1998) built on this definition by noting that crises are highly ambiguous events that necessitate a decision or judgment that will result in a change for better or for worse.

The differing definitions of crisis are further fragmented when types of crises are examined. Quarantelli and Dynes (1977) separated crises into consensus and dissensus types. Consensus-type crises are those where there is an agreement on the meaning of the situation, the norms and values that are appropriate, and priorities that should be followed. Dissensus-type crises are conflict containing situations where there are sharply contrasting views of the nature of the situation, what brought it about, and what should be done to resolve it. Heath and Palenchar (2009) defined crisis events in terms of its potential impact on the health of the organization, including bed rest, medication, chronic, and fatal. Identifiable typology of crisis types include natural disasters, workplace, violence, rumors, malevolence, challenge, technical error accidents, technical error product harm, human effort product harm, human effort accidents, and organizational misdeeds. Heath and Palenchar further examined crisis types by looking at the locus of responsibility as being internal (poor operational procedures) or external (act of God or terrorism). Today, organizations find themselves vulnerable to shouldering responsibility regardless of whether it lies inside or outside the organization.

## **Crisis Communications Defined**

If an event is perceived by stakeholders to be a crisis, then the shaping tools of crisis communications are needed. As opposed to risk communications that seeks to help people understand the facts that are truly relevant to their own life so that they can make informed decisions about risk, crisis communications is more about managing the outcome, impact, and public perception of a crisis (Gray, 2003). Coombs (1999) defined crisis communications as messages that are integrated and critical elements of a four-part overall crisis management process that includes prevention, preparation, performance and learning.

Originally crisis communications was viewed solely as a part of public relations used to craft a strategic post-crisis response that reduced or diffused blame and responsibility. But the examination of modern day crises repositioned crisis communications as an ongoing process not relegated to the stage of post-crisis communication. Crisis communications is now associated with coordination of resources such as equipment, personnel, and information to avoid or reduce harm and for coordinating resources during post-crisis support and recovery. Crisis communications also plays the dominant role in risk identification where the appropriate communication of risk may spur mitigating behaviors that can reduce the risk (Sellnow & Seeger, 1997).

Crisis communication is also seen as an enactment-based perspective where it frames the fundamental meaning of crisis events (Sellnow & Seeger, 1997). In that vein, crisis communicators have the ability to shape how a crisis and the organization are viewed by the public. Sturges (1994) outlined three steps of which this can be accomplished: (1) information that tells stakeholders how to react to the crisis (2) information that helps people psychologically

cope with the magnitude of the crisis situation, and (3) information that people will use to formulate an image about the organization.

### **Stages of Crisis Communications**

Achieving the goal of minimizing damage created by a crisis is handled in stages, although how many stages depends on who you ask. Fink (1986) suggested there were four stages to a crisis lifecycle: (1) the prodromal stage, where clues or hints that potential for a crisis begin to emerge; (2) crisis breakout or acute stages, which features a triggering event with attendant damage; (3) chronic stage, where effects of a crisis linger as efforts to clean-up the crisis progress; and (4) resolution, where there is some clear signal that the crisis is over. The successful crisis manager must act appropriately for each crisis stage. Furthermore, Fink's model illustrated the idea that crisis managers have the ability to be proactive when dealing with a crisis, not reactive, since warning signs, or prodromes, can be detected.

Sturges' (1994) model elaborated on Fink's link between crisis stages and communication actions. Crisis managers must tailor their messages to meet the demands of the crisis phase. For example, in the acute phase where stakeholders do not know what is occurring, crisis managers must focus on getting them information. In the resolution phase, stakeholders are receptive to reputation-building messages; crisis managers have an opportunity to shape perceptions.

Mitroff (1994) added a fifth stage to Fink's four-stage model that creates the opportunity to learn from the crisis and possibly prevent future crises or fine-tune the response, which may actually help an organization avoid a crisis or at least minimize its impact. Coombs (1999) described a basic three-stage model, which includes pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis macro-stages. The pre-crisis stage focuses on crisis preparation such as prodromal/signal detection and probing. The crisis stage features actions taken to deal with the crisis or trigger event, such as

damage containment and recovery. The post-crisis stage occurs after the crisis is resolved when crisis managers can learn from their recent experience.

Coombs' and other crisis communications model can be updated and enhanced by integrating the use of social media. Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith (2008) suggested adding social media related steps to strengthening crisis response and, protecting an organization from triggering or exacerbating crises. In the pre-crisis phase new technologies can be used for monitoring and issues management tools. "Faced with these fragmented, empowered audiences (online), it is clear that early identification of issues and a quick, clear, honest response is essential to preventing issues from becoming crises and facts from becoming distorted by rumors. An early analysis of web-based content might provide the early warning needed to develop appropriate plans and responses and enable them to avoid bad situations" (p. 4). The researchers also suggested registering all possible domain names, including ones with negative connotations to maintain control; registering with an online media monitoring service; creating a hidden or 'dark' website that can be used externally in case of a crisis; and drafting guidelines for online rumors. Also, have a web expert and/or blogger on your crisis team, and identify online influencers that can help you in times of crises. It is also important to create relationships with stakeholders online. One study by Sweetser and Metzgar (2007) found that those who read blogs perceive a lower level of crisis for an organization than those that don't. The researchers suggested that launching a blog in response to a crisis could be an effective crisis management tool.

In the crisis phase, Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith (2008) suggested using the internet as a third-party information site such as a blog; creating interactive tools such as mini-surveys to understand stakeholders' perceptions; using chat tools to foster dialogues; and having CEOs

personally address the stakeholders. Social media can also be used as a way to gather and communicate information.

In new crisis communication models that address new technology and social media, crisis communicators must be on alert for fragmented audiences, otherwise their messages may not reach intended audiences. According to Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith (2008), "Companies need to evaluate whether different audiences are likely to turn to the internet for information during a crisis and make sure the organization responds accordingly...Not all audiences are equally familiar with social media and traditional channels of communications could be more adequate in some instances (p. 4). This can be determined using surveys in the pre-crisis phase. In the post-crisis phase, Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith suggested evaluating online-related measures; defining online strategies and tactics to re-build your company's reputation; continue tracking and monitoring blogs, online media; and sending an online thank-you note to those who helped during the crisis.

### **The Role of Social Media and Mobile Technology**

On January 15, 2009, a US Airways flight was heading from New York to North Carolina when it was forced to make a crash landing into the Hudson River. Janis Krums, a citizen on a ferry, took a picture of the plane with his iPhone and uploaded it to TwitPic (a mobile photosharing site that posts directly to Twitter). Within three hours, the photo was viewed online 40,000 times and was seen on several national news networks and newspapers (Terdiman, 2009). This is the impact of social media – intensified by mobile technology – to collect and spread instantaneous information. Social media empowers everyday people to share what they see with the world. This influence can help or hinder organizations' crisis communications in times of crises. In this section, this paper will explore how social media can help by supplying

stakeholders with a ready resource to make sense of a crisis, and by creating a way to share integral, time-sensitive information quickly to citizens and crisis managers and communicators. By the same token, social media can hinder organizations' crisis communications by spreading misinformation at rapid speed. Also, not everyone using social media has the best intentions – they may use it to harm an organization thereby potentially creating a crisis.

### **Social Media: Changing the Crisis Communications Landscape**

With social media, everyone has the potential to be watchdogs, citizen journalists and photojournalists that can constantly survey the world around them and share what they find online. This acceleration of communication and awareness has serious implications for crisis communications. It is changing the landscape in which crisis communicators operate. No longer do they do need to be confined by space and time. "The explosion of social media – everything from social networking websites, to blogs, to broadcast text messaging – has changed the way in which anyone involved in risk communications must look at overall communication plans. Especially in times of emergency, social media can and should be employed to transmit critically important information immediately to as many people as possible" (American Public Health Association, p. 1). Social media can be defined in various ways, but for the purpose of this paper, it will be defined as "the various electronic tools, technologies, and applications that facilitate interactive communication and content exchange, enabling the user to move back and forth easily between the roles of audience and content producers" (American Public Health Association, p. 1). Today's portfolio of tools includes blogs, social networking sites, RSS feeds, texting, and other formats.

The convergence of old and new technology is allowing *people* to converge during times of crises in old and news ways, as well. Hughes, Palen, Sutton, Liu and Vieweg (2008) note

more people are participating in disaster response because this technology has erased the temporal and geographic barriers. The ways they participate are the same, but the amount of participants is continually growing. According to Hughes, et al., "This unwieldy frontier for disaster activity as a matter of social convergence parallels geographical on-site behavior" (p. 8). The authors note typical on-line social convergence behaviors during times of crises are the same as on the ground behaviors. Those behaviors are helping, being anxious, returning, supporting, mourning, exploiting, and being curious. The similarity in behaviors means crisis communications strategies do not need to be drastically overhauled to incorporate social media but merely re-tooled in framing messages and targeting audiences using the new media.

#### **Advantage: Stakeholder "Sensemaking"**

During crises, people seek to find order in the chaos – they seek to make sense of what is happening around them. Weick (1998) dubs this "sensemaking." Social media, particularly where users can take pictures and videos of the event, adds another, very effective, avenue for doing this. "Sharing photos in such situations can be informative, newsworthy, and therapeutic. Such activity has been in place since the invention of cameras; now, with digital cameras and photo-sharing websites, the arena for sharing photographic-based information has expanded its reach" (Liu, Palen, Sutton, Hughes, & Vieweg, 2008, p. 1). The technological convergence of camera phones and user-generated websites support new forms of peer-to-peer communication and grassroots organization. As an example, groups designated as "image aggregators" have been set up on Flickr in times of crises as a way for stakeholders to cope with the crises. According to the authors, this happened during hurricanes Katrina and Rita and the Virginia Tech shootings.

#### **Advantage: Aiding in Crisis Communications**

The enablement of sensemaking by this new technology can help crisis responders by supplying useful information about the emergency to crisis communicators and other stakeholders. "Information and communication technology (ICT) has expanded the ways people can assist and involve themselves in disaster situations. In recent disasters, ICT has served as a means of expanded communication for disaster survivors, curious onlookers, and compassionate helpers wishing to aid those directly affected by crisis both inside and outside the geographical space of the disaster" (Palen and Liu, 2007, p. 1). The stakeholders on the ground being affected by the crisis are generally the ones with firsthand knowledge of the event. These people may serve the role of information brokers or technical facilitators as they assist in connecting people and information via a number of technology media. They can help provide and distribute information as well as create visuals to help organize relevant information. They may not intend to help crisis communicators, but the information they provide inherently does.

For example, during the 2007 Southern California wildfires, people used Google Mashups to create maps that showed locations of evacuated areas, contained burns, destroyed homes, and other relevant information. The mashups were created by volunteer groups in the area, along with news sources that sent out information via Twitter in order to supply the public with the latest information. (Sutton, Palen, & Shklovski, 2008). In another example, during the SARS outbreak in China, citizens communicated information and opinions regarding the virus through text messaging. This avenue was chosen to circumvent the government's efforts to deny the public information. Citizens knew more about the virus than the World Health Organization and thus filled the information void using their own method – mobile technology (Gordon, 2007). Also, during the 2008 Mumbai, India hostage situation in which terrorists killed 173 people and injured more than 300, hostages and resident witnesses were transmitting disturbing

accounts and images using text on their mobile phones, Twitter Tweets, and Flickr images (Gordon, 2007). Traditional news organizations are using social media, too. Fox 5 News in Washington, D.C. received instant feedback regarding storm damage via Twitter and Facebook and aired it on their newscasts. This information was received faster than the response from the sheriff's offices in affected areas (American Public Health Association).

Furthermore, stakeholders can use user-generated mobile technology in an effort to aid response efforts. They simply want to help. When trying to determine who the victims of the Virginia Tech Massacre were, people began posting information on websites such as the "I'm Ok at VT" Facebook page. The lists were a completely independent, decentralized effort that were accurate and treated with intense seriousness by participants out of respect for the victims' families. This behavior broke with the typical ways in which activity by the public is portrayed in times of crises, which is one in need of policing and control (Vieweg, Palen, Liu, Hughes & Sutton, 2008).

### **Disadvantage: Social Media as the Source of Misinformation**

For all of its advantages, the incredibly assessable and rapid nature of social media, particularly via mobile technology, has its disadvantages. For one, it can facilitate or exacerbate crises by spreading negative information or misinformation at an incredible speed. "Sometimes the internet merely acts as an agent that accelerates the crises news cycle and breaks geographic boundaries" (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008, p. 9). Under these circumstances, the internet would function as traditional mainstream media merely mirroring reality, although obviously in a much faster and viral way. This can make it difficult for crisis communicators to control their narratives, making it even more important for communicators to master the use of social media.

Furthermore, in times of crises social media can also create a lot of noise in which stakeholders need to sift through to find or send relevant information. This is why it is important to establish relationships online in the pre-crisis phase so stakeholders know where to find relevant information in times of crises. An analysis by Palen and Starbird (2010) illustrates that useful information is often "retweeted" via Twitter. "This trend supports the idea of retweets performing a recommendation role within Twitterverse, as locals actively choose to spread this type of information over others" (p. 9). This observation could be useful to crisis communicators trying to cut through the noise to access useful information.

### **Disadvantage: Social Media as a Crisis Trigger**

Social media may also trigger crises in the form of rumors, hacking, shadow or copy-cat websites, web security breaks, and all forms of cyber-terrorism (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008). For instance, in 1994 Intel had to replace thousands of Pentium chips when a math professor discovered a flaw and posted it on the internet. Similarly, bicycle-lock company Kryptonite lost \$10 million when a blogger posted that its locks could be opened by a ballpoint pen and the rumor spread. Additionally, big corporations such as Mercedes-Benz, United Airlines and McDonald's all have spoof copy cat websites that can, or have, posed problems for the companies (Gonzales-Herrero & Smith, 2008). As mentioned earlier, it is recommended that organizations have the foresight to purchase all perceived negative and positive domain names associated with their company.

### **Crisis Communications and Social Media in Practice**

Some entities are already beginning to incorporate social media into their crisis communications plans. During the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, traditional

communications systems were down and social media quickly replaced them as the primary way to communicate. The social media response was so overwhelming that the Homeland Security Department launched the Haiti Social Media Disaster Monitoring Initiative to get information more quickly to people involved in recovery efforts by tracking up to 60 internet sites. On January 21, a worker at the Homeland Security's National Operations Center read a tweet about people buried under the Building Napolin in Port-au-Prince, and gave the building latitude and longitude. The center forwarded the message to the State Department, which sent a rescue team to the building. The American Red Cross also used social media in rescue efforts (Frank, T., 2010)

Similarly, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) used social media to reach the public with its "Hurricane Tip of the Week" posted online and sent via email and text messages. The CDC also used social media during the salmonella outbreak in 2009, by building a widget to drive people to their database. Officials called it the "Little Widget That Could, " and lauded their social media communications calling it the most successful part of their communications plan during the outbreak and related recall in raising public awareness and allowing the public to be involved directly in exponentially increasing awareness. Additionally, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has used Twitter to hold news conferences and has held bloggers' round tables (American Public Health Association, n.d.).

While many organizations may be recognizing the attributes of social media in their crisis communications plan, it is crucial they avoid the "shiny new toy syndrome," in which the resource may be used in a multitude of ways, none of which are effective. The Red Cross's way around this was to develop a disaster online philosophy: use social media to empower clients and supporters to get or give help during a disaster. Red Cross's platforms include a blog, Facebook,

disaster online newsroom, Twitter and Flickr. Flickr photo posts averaged 4,000 views daily during Hurricanes Ike and Gustav and helped the Red Cross disseminate the pertinent information (American Public Health Association, n. d.).

### **Conclusion: The importance of Social Media to Crisis Communications**

As discussed in the beginning of this paper, receiving and distributing information quickly is at the heart of crisis communications. Social media provides a way to do this that transcends time and space. With mobile technology, it allows crisis communicators access to voice, photographs, and video of a crisis as it happens, or moments after. This can be used for gathering or disseminating information. Social media is not the panacea of crisis communications, but it is another tool to communicate and another way to send and receive information. It is changing the landscape of the practice. There are positives and negatives but the advantages for crisis communications and social media far outweigh the disadvantages.

Outside social media, organizations pay large sums of money to have eyes and ears on the ground in times of crises, or even in times of normalcy to protect against potential crises. Social media provides an opportunity for this, with minimal cost. Everyone is a watchdog. This means everyone has the power to help communicate in times of crises. The key is incorporating this power into your crisis communication plans and practicing it. While social media may be novel and seem foreign to some, in essence it is fundamentally the same way stakeholders communicate only it is not bounded geographically or temporally. Aforementioned research has found that people act the same in times of crises but merely over a different medium. This is promising news for crisis communicators. It means they do not need to reinvent the wheel.

Like before, it is necessary to build relationships with stakeholders using social media so they know where to find you in times of crises. This may also cut down on misinformation. It

means establishing relationships with bloggers much like an organization would with reporters. It means buying up domain names to protect your reputation. It means providing avenues for people to share information and make sense of crises such as a Flickr site. The pre-crisis phase is just as important as the crisis and post crisis phase. Likely whatever tone an organization has with its stakeholders already will carry over with its social media policy. However, social media allows that relationship to be stronger with easier more relaxed contact. A stronger relationship means a stronger reputation which helps in crisis communications. An organization that ignores the power of this new communications tool is an organization that may suffer more harm than necessary during a crisis, as well and more importantly the potentially negative health and safety impacts on their stakeholders.

This paper does not specifically outline a plan in how to successfully use this tool. This is because there is little non-anecdotal research into the preferences of stakeholders when it comes to communicating via social media with organizations. There is also little research as to how to build relationships with stakeholders using social media. This paper can only offer speculative recommendation built on a thorough literature review search. Furthermore, this paper discusses the power of crisis communications to shape stakeholders' perception of an event but does not discuss the success rate of social media in accomplishing this goal. This is because not much is known as to how effective social media is in framing messages and perceptions in times of crises. More research is needed as to how crisis communicators can use the new media to harness useful information, reach fragmented audiences, and blunt potential crises. The better crisis communicators understand this tool, the better they can use it their advantage in times of crises, to help both their organization and their stakeholders.

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