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Understanding the Role of Social Media in Incident/Crisis Communication

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Abstract

How organisations communicate with their audience during an incident or crisis is important because it can adversely affect corporate reputation if mishandled. With the advent of social media, organisations have only a few “golden minutes” rather than “golden hours” to communicate with their audience as an incident/crisis unfolds. However, while social media usage by the general population is increasing rapidly, most organisations are not ready to manage incidents or crises via the use of social media. Theoretical knowledge is still lacking in this regard. This study provides a conceptual framework for investigating how organisations communicate with their audience via social media during an incident or crisis and aims to identify the important factors relating to the use of social media in a negative situation.

Keywords

Social media, incident/crisis communication, response strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as “a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content”. Social media possesses characteristics of participation, openness, conversation, community and connectedness (Mayfield 2006), aspects of communication missing in many traditional media such as print, radio and television, and aspects of communication that are important for interpersonal communication. Social media therefore facilitates interpersonal communication. In addition, many businesses have adopted it as a business tool (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010) that help them in their marketing, customer relations management, business networking and recruiting (Derham et al. 2011). The new technologies have changed the way organisations communicate with their customers, investors, employees, the media and other stakeholders. Organisations try to make profitable use of social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Wikipedia and so on (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). In this paper we focus on one important particular business use of social media, namely how it can be used in an incident/crisis situation.

The following example illustrates some of the issues that organisations face. In 2010, a Qantas flight made an emergency landing in Singapore due to an engine problem. In the key ‘golden hours’ after the incident Qantas were using traditional media to combat inaccurate media reports that reported that the plane had actually crashed. At the same time, passengers were tweeting pictures of the damage as their plane sat on the tarmac and a photo from an island showing locals holding a large piece of debris circulated around Twitter with the hashtag #QF32 that intensified spreading the false rumours of a plane crash. However, the Qantas Twitter account remained strangely silent on the issue. Days later, Alan Joyce, Qantas CEO, said: “We were ready for traditional media [...] we had our press statement out within half an hour of us knowing the issue. But we’d missed this whole [social media] end of communication” (Bailey 2013).

This example describes the role social media can play in a crisis, and illustrates that organisations, even large ones such as Qantas, may be unprepared to manage the additional communications challenges presented by the widespread use of social media (Van den Hurk 2013). Many crisis management professionals and researchers now recognise the importance of the way organisations communicate with and disseminate information to the communities affected by a crisis (Veil et al. 2011). Many organisations realise the importance of good communication in these negative situations and are moving toward using social media to communicate with their audience (including customers) (Eriksson 2012).

Incidents and crises, such as the Qantas example, are common occurrences (Schultz et al. 2011). If an incident or crisis is not handled appropriately they can result in reputational damage to an organisation, bring financial loss, cause injuries or death to stakeholders or cause environmental harm (Heath and Millar 2004). Poor communication during an incident/crisis could even make the situations worse (Marra 1999). And, as the Qantas example illustrates, it may not be sufficient for the organisation to be able to prepare traditional media releases. Depending on the nature of the incident/crisis, organisations may need to also monitor what their customers are saying via social media during an incident/crisis, respond more rapidly than they did previously and possibly engage with stakeholders, such as customers, using social media itself. During an incident/crisis people refer to organisation's blogs and social network sites in order to obtain more information and they may become frustrated when they see lots of negative comments without any formal response from the organisation. Even worse, people may get disgruntled when they visit the Facebook page or twitter feed of the organisation suffering an incident/crisis and realise that they do not even address the fact that an incident/crisis is actually occurring (Coombs 2011). Failure to do so could cause significant damage to the organisation's reputation, or worse.

This study described in the paper addresses a number of the above issues and proposes the following questions:

1. How do organisations communicate with their audience in social media during an incident/crisis?
2. What are the important factors in incident/crisis communication via social media?
3. How do organisations use different social media applications in incident/crisis communication?

This research-in-progress paper is structured as follows. After defining the key terms, the related literature is reviewed and the underpinning theory explained. Then, the conceptual framework is discussed and the research approach is outlined. Finally, the anticipated research contributions are summarised.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, we first define social media, incident and crisis and then explain crisis management and communication and describe situational crisis communication theory. We then consider social media as a communication channel and explain the important factors in incident/crisis communication. Finally the conceptual framework is proposed.

Social Media and Social Network Sites

Social media sites can be grouped into different categories in terms of functionality and include social network sites and microblogging sites. Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social network sites as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system". Microblogging is a form of blogging of which entry typically consists of short content such as phrases, quick comments, images, or links to videos (Suh et al. 2010). These tools provide users with an easy way to share information with others about their activities, opinions and status (Java et al. 2007). Facebook can be considered as a social network site while Twitter is considered as a microblogging site.

For this research, we use the term 'social media' to refer to both social network sites and microblogging sites.

Business Continuity Management

Business continuity management (BCM) is that management responsibility involved with protecting the organisation against the disruptive forces of a negative occurrence (Adkins et al. 2009). BCM can be conceptualised as a "holistic management process that identifies potential threats to an organisation and the impacts to business operations that those threats, if realised, might cause, and which provides a framework for building organisational resilience with the capability for an effective response that safeguards the interests of its key stakeholders, reputation, brand and value-creating activities"(British Standards Institution, 2006, cited from Herbane 2010). BCM includes areas of contingency planning and business continuity response or crisis management. Contingency planning is performed pro-actively while business continuity response or crisis management becomes activated when a crisis happens (BSI 2009). Crisis communication is part of the crisis

management efforts. As Hayes and Patton (2001) state crisis response strategies are the communicative messages selected by the management of the organisation to manage a crisis.

Incident and Crisis Definition

The definition of a crisis is difficult as there are a number of definitions in the literature (Reilly 1993; Smith 2005). Coombs (2011) defines a crisis as “an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organisation’s performance and generate negative outcomes”. An incident is an event that resembles a crisis and threatens organisational reputation, if neglected or mismanaged, can escalate into a crisis (Coombs 2011).

While unpredictable, crises are not unexpected. Organisations know that crises will occur but they do not know when, hence they should be prepared. Crises also usually breach the expectations that stakeholders have about the organisation. For example, stakeholders usually expect that products should not be harmful, planes should fly safely and management of organisations should not steal the money. A breach of these expectations in a crisis therefore usually affects stakeholders by making them upset or angry. The crisis therefore threatens the relationship between stakeholders and the organisation which in turn endangers the reputation of the organisation in the eyes of stakeholders (Coombs 2011).

Crisis Management and Communication

Pearson and Mitroff (1993) divide crisis management into five phases. The first phase is signal detection in which warning signals are identified. The second phase is preparation/prevention and mostly takes place simultaneously with the first phase. In this phase, incidents are looked for and then worked on to diminish their potential for harm. In spite of all the efforts to prevent crises, some crises will inevitably hit the organisation. The third phase, then, is damage containment that aims to limit the effects of a crisis. In this phase the organisation tries to prevent the spreading of the crisis to uncontaminated parts of the organisation or the environment. The fourth phase is recovery with the aim of recovering normal business operations as soon as possible. The final phase is learning. In this phase, the performance of the organisation in handling the crisis is reviewed and critiqued to learn about aspects of the management that were done well and what needs to be improved to manage crises better in future (Mitroff 1994).

The above phases provide a useful framework for understanding the role of communication responses by the organisation. The communication between the organisation and its stakeholders is considered as an important part of crisis management effort (Marra 1999; Sturges 1994). Weick (1995) emphasises that the challenging part for organisations is not the crisis itself but how to respond. Similarly, Marra (1999) states that communication plays an important role in almost all successful incident/crisis management efforts. Coombs (1999) proposes that communication during and after an incident/crisis is one of the most influential factors in determining the long-term effects of an incident/crisis.

The dialogue between an organisation and its stakeholders as a negative occurrence happens are usually organised in terms of response strategies (Benoit 1997; Mohamed et al. 1999; Sellnow and Ulmer 1995) that are designed to minimise damage to the reputation of the organisation (Fearn-Banks 2011; Heath and Millar 2004; King 2002). According to Coombs (2011), response strategies are the actual responses an organisation uses to communicate about a negative event. Since communication encompasses both verbal and nonverbal aspects, response strategies comprise both verbal and nonverbal communication. In other words, incident/crisis response strategies consist of either words or actions (Coombs 2011).

Coombs (2011) classified the response strategies into four clusters: the denial cluster, the diminishing cluster, the rebuilding cluster and the bolstering cluster. The denial cluster consists of responses attacking the accuser, denial and scapegoating strategies. These responses try to remove any connection between the incident/crisis and the organisation to show that the organisation is not responsible for or related to the incident/crisis. The diminishing cluster involves excusing and justification strategies that aim to lessen the attribution of control over the incident/crisis or the negative effects of the incident/crisis in order to reduce the threat to the reputation of the organisation. The strategies in the rebuilding cluster attempt to improve the organisation’s reputation by compensating and apologising to reduce the negative effects of the incident/crisis. The bolstering cluster encompasses strategies concerned with reminding, ingratiation and victimage that are supplementary to responses in the other three clusters since they focus on the organisation which might seem egocentric if are used alone (Coombs 2011).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is based on different theories comprising Attribution Theory (Weiner 1995), Apologia (Dionisopoulos et al. 1988), Image Restoration Theory (Benoit 1995) and Impression

Management Strategies (Allen and Caillouet 1994). SCCT was proposed by Coombs and Holladay (2002) and further developed by Coombs (2007, 2010).

SCCT can be regarded as an Attribution Theory-based approach to incident/crisis communication (Heath and Millar 2004). However, SCCT is more comprehensive than Attribution Theory or any of the other theories it draws on since it suggests choosing response strategies based on situational factors. It suggests that incident/crisis managers try to understand the negative situation to be able to choose the response strategy or strategies that will minimise the reputational threat to the organisation. Coombs (2007) defines reputational threat as the degree of damage that an incident/crisis can cause to the reputation of the organisation if no action is taken.

SCCT recommends that managers follow a two-step process to evaluate the reputational threat of an incident/crisis. In the first step, incident/crisis type is determined. Incident/crisis type is "the frame that the public use to interpret the event" (Coombs and Holladay 2002). SCCT proposes that there are ten crisis types that are classified into three main clusters of incident/crisis that are defined by the level of responsibility that is attributed to the organisation: victim, accident and preventable. Therefore, each cluster attributes a different level of responsibility to the organisation (Coombs and Holladay 2002). The victim cluster attributes very little responsibility to the organisation in terms of the negative occurrence. Stakeholders perceive the organisation as the victim of the negative occurrence, not the cause of it. The accident cluster attributes low responsibility to the organisation. Stakeholders consider the incident/crisis as unintentional and uncontrollable. The preventable cluster leads to the very strong attribution of responsibility which means that the organisation intentionally involved in behaviours that brought about the incident/crisis.

In the second step, the crisis team determines if there is any prior incident/crisis history or poor reputation. Incident/crisis history indicates whether an organisation has encountered a similar incident/crisis in the past (Coombs 2004). Attribution Theory suggests that a history of similar incidents/crises implies there is an ongoing problem in the organisation that needs to be solved (Kelley and Michela 1980; Martinko and Wallace 2004). The organisation's response to negative publicity are more likely to be accepted if the organisation has held a good reputation before the incident/crisis while an organisation with poor reputation will be considered guilty regardless of its response legitimacy (Morley 2002). Hence, if an organisation has had a similar incident/crisis in the past or has a negative prior reputation, more responsibility is attributed to it and the reputational threat is higher (Coombs and Holladay 2004; Coombs and Holladay 2006). In other words, if an organisation has an incident/crisis history and unfavourable prior reputation, stakeholders will regard a victim cluster as an accidental one and an accidental cluster like a preventable one (Coombs 2011).

Once the reputational threat is evaluated, appropriate response strategies are selected. Based on SCCT, as the reputational threat increases more accommodative strategies should be selected.

Social Media as a Communication Channel

Organisations use various channels for incident/crisis communication including mass media and the Internet. Incident/crisis communication channels should be selected appropriately to ensure that the appropriate audience receives the intended message (Argenti 2002). Schultz et al. (2011) found that the channel of communication may be more important than the message.

Gonzalez & Smith (2008) recognised two roles for the Internet in an incident/crisis situation that, with slight changes, can also be considered for social media. Social media can facilitate as well as trigger an incident/crisis. While in some situations it is difficult to recognize if social media has the role of a facilitator or a trigger, Gonzalez & Smith (2008) state that it makes little difference. Direct and open communication with the public, which builds trust in any incident/crisis situation, determines the success or failure of any organisation in handling the situation (Preble 1997).

Social media is mostly considered as more interactive, dialogic, authentic and credible (Schultz et al. 2011). They can reach a larger audience and allow the audience to reply and comment comfortably. Due to real-time nature of social media, organisations can monitor the feedback of the audience about the organisation's incident/crisis response and amend their responses according to the audience feedback. Hence social media can obliterate the boundary between interpersonal and mass communication more easily than traditional media (Schultz et al. 2011). Yang and Lim (2009) state that while established newspapers have high credibility, organisations can get higher credibility by communicating via blogs.

Communicating strategies are more effective when they are conveyed via social media and results in less negative reactions than blogs and newspaper articles (Schultz et al. 2011). When the incident/crisis information was disseminated by the organisation itself, participants were not willing to look for more information. However, when the initial information was from a third party they were more likely to seek more information (Austin et al.

2012). The reason might be that organisations can disseminate accurate information when they communicate directly with the audience, since there is no need for people to seek for accurate information in other sources (Austin et al. 2012). This highlights the important role that organisations have in incident/crisis communication and handling the negative situation.

Factors Affecting Incident/Crisis Communication in Social Media

Although there is a great deal of research on incident/crisis communication, there has been limited research to determine the factors that organisations should consider in their communication with their audience during a negative occurrence. However, some basic principles are known. For example, the literature suggests that organisations consider honesty in their communication in a negative situation and show compassion and sympathy in their incident/crisis communication messages and regard stakeholders' emotions as legitimate (Seeger et al. 2001; Veil et al. 2011). If stakeholders deem that the organisation is dishonest, they will look for other sources which might be unreliable (Venette 2006). The literature also suggests that information be disseminated quickly, accurately, directly, and candidly to critical stakeholders such as the media (Horsley and Barker 2002).

During the occurrence of a negative event, organisations should consider the feedback received from the audience after the negative occurrence and the primary emotions of the audience (Jin 2010) to select the best response strategy that is more likely to be accepted by the audience (Seeger et al. 2001). Hence, they can revise their messages to make effective communication (Small 1991; Veil et al. 2011; Venette 2006; Williams and Olaniran 1994).

Organisations may also need to take into account sensitive issues relating to the primary emotions of the audience (Jin 2010). When the organisation is perceived responsible for the negative occurrence it is more likely that the public feel more incident/crisis emotions in general such as anxiety and anger especially when the incident/crisis information is shared via a third party rather than the organisation (Jin et al. 2011). Social media provides this opportunity for organisations to communicate directly with their audience. Also, accommodative responses are more acceptable from the organisation when publics perceive the organisation accountable for the incident/crisis (Jin et al. 2011). This is in agreement with Coomb's situational crisis communication theory. When an organisation decides to provide no response through the online communication during an incident/crisis it is anonymous with "no comment" (Taylor and Perry 2005).

These features probably apply to all forms of communication, social media included. But features of social media might mean that some of the principles need to be modified. For example, the rapid rate at which bad news can be spread via social media is likely to mean that organisations will need to respond very quickly, probably within hours not within days (Park et al. 2012). While not all new, a comprehensive evaluation of features such as those discussed above has not been carried out. That is one of the primary aims of this research: to identify the factors that have important roles in social media communication during a negative occurrence.

THE PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Although prior research has been focused on incident/crisis communication, little considers social media as the communication channel. And while it is likely that theories such as SCCT will still provide useful insight into the use of social media in negative situations, it is also likely that there are other strategies that organisations could employ. For example, one of the strategies that organisations might use during an incident/crisis is deleting the posts that are unfavourable to them during an incident/crisis. As an example, the US Applebee's restaurant chain caused a crisis by not responding appropriately on its Facebook page (Dietrich 2013). The case related to an Applebee's waitress losing her job for posting online the picture of a receipt with a customer's name on it, this customer had declined to leave a tip. Applebee's argued that the decision was made because the waitress had violated the customer's privacy. However, their Facebook followers argued that Applebee's themselves had violated another customer's privacy by posting a picture of a note from a guest that clearly showed the guest's name who complemented Applebee's. One of the strategies that Applebee's used to handle the situation was hiding its posts, which contained more than 20,000 comments. This decision upset Applebee's Facebook followers and enflamed the situation (Stollar 2013). Hiding or deleting posts was not an issue in traditional crisis communication channels and theories such as SCCT may not be able to fully explain it. Also, there are some important factors that organisations should probably consider in their incident/crisis communication when using social media such as having the consistency throughout their messages in different social media technologies such as Facebook and Twitter.

From a practical point of view, we explored the extent to which the German BSI-Standard 100-4 covers the full range of issues that organisations need to take into account in crisis communication. BSI-Standard 100-4

specifies the generic requirements for business continuity management and aims to describe a systematic method for handling all types of crises that could lead to a disruption of business operations if neglected or mismanaged (BSI 2009). It includes crisis management, crisis communication and subsequently communication channels and while the Internet is considered as an online communication channel, social media is not mentioned in this standard that might be due to the novelty of using social media in this area and lack of knowledge in this regard. Hence, the results of this study can contribute to increasing the knowledge in this area in practice.

Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework based upon the critical analysis of the literature identified in this study. As stated before, the whole process of crisis management is part of the business continuity management umbrella. To develop the framework we categorized the crisis management stages into three stages of incident, crisis and post crisis. Organisations need to communicate with their audience in each of these three stages. In particular, the study does not include the post crisis stage, because studying this stage requires a long-term study. In addition, the post-crisis stage is an internal process to organisations in which communication does not have a significant role. Hence, the dashed box in Figure 1 shows the stages that this study is going to investigate. We will examine the communication between the organisations and their audience in incident stage and crisis stage. The communication channel that is considered here is social media. However, this framework is just an initial one that is used in this stage of research. Certainly, it will change accordingly in later stages of the research.

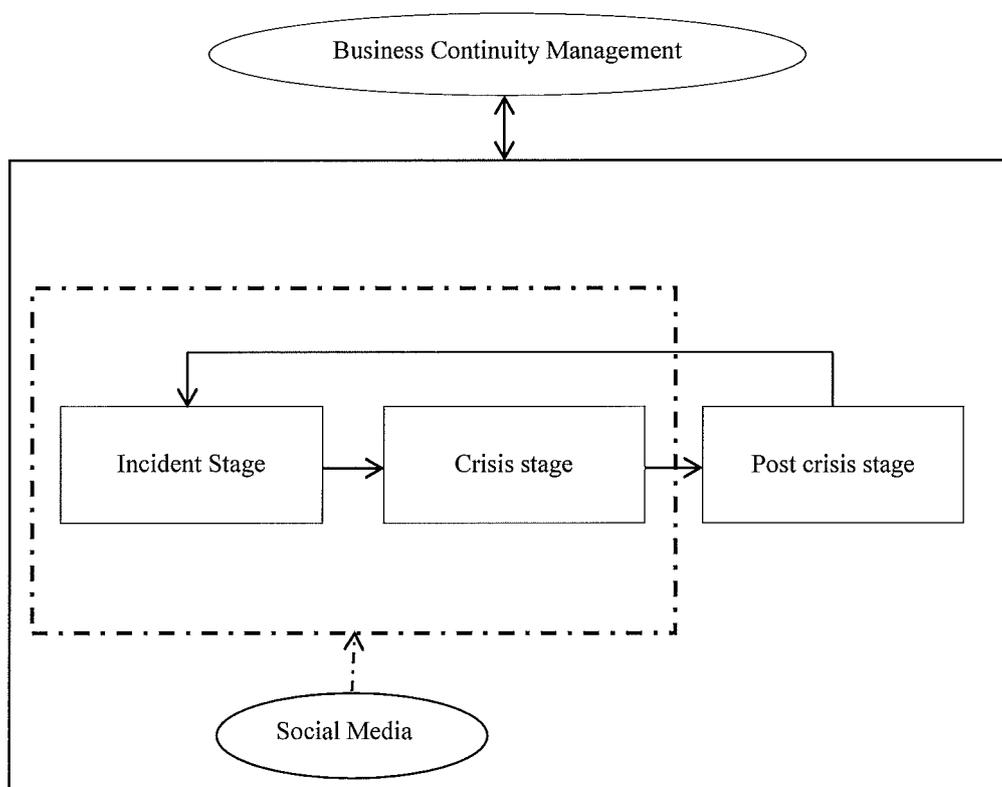


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

NEXT STAGE

The next step in this research-in-progress is collecting the research data through content analysis, interviewing and focus groups. The research questions are exploratory in nature so we will adopt a qualitative approach; such an approach is appropriate when the subject of the study is new and little is known about it (Neuman 2011; Strauss and Corbin 1990).

Data gathering will involve three stages. The first stage is content analysis of social network sites (Twitter accounts and Facebook pages) of large organisations where a crisis or incident has occurred. In the second stage, formal semi-structured interviews will be conducted with public relations specialists with social media knowledge and business continuity specialists. The data will be analysed by using thematic analysis. Finally, the findings will be evaluated in a focus group consisting of public relations specialists with social media knowledge and business continuity specialists.

ANTICIPATED RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study will have several contributions. Although social media is being used in the incident/crisis communication in practice there is a lack of academic research in this area (Coombs 2008; Eriksson 2012; Jin Liu Austin 2011). This research will extend SCCT to include any particular issues involving social media. It will also increase understanding about the way organisations use social media in incident/crisis communication and the important factors in incident/crisis communication. This research will identify different examples of social media usage in incident/crisis communication by organisations and provide guidance for social media usage in a negative situation. Also, it will contribute to filling the gap that exists in BCM standard documents such as BSI-Standard 100-4 (BSI 2009).

In summary, this study takes a qualitative approach to examine the communication between an organisation and its audience as a negative occurrence unfolds. It will provide a rich descriptive analysis of how companies communicate via social media in their incident/crisis communication with their audience. In addition, we will identify the important factors in incident/crisis communication in social media.

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