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A Preliminary Study on Effects of Social Media in Crisis Communication from Public Relations Practitioners' Views

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Abstract

Studies on effects of social media on crisis communication is scarce. This study sought to bridge this gap in research and provide insights for organizations to use in managing crisis communication today. The data for this preliminary study is based on interviews of public relations professionals and case histories of Malaysia Airlines MH 370 crises. It was found that social media substantially accelerated the need for crisis communication by altering the practice of crisis communication, from how crises is reported and managed by organizations. This study also proposed strategies that organizations can implement to prepare for managing the social media element of a crisis.

1. Introduction

Currently, social media is no longer a buzz word, although many of the mediums or the particular forms of media used are new. Macias, Hilyard and Freimuth (2009) mentioned that social media has brought changes in communication behaviour and communication practices. It also have profound implications especially in the area of

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crisis communications and has been radically changing the landscape of corporate communication over the past few years with its characteristics such as immediacy, ubiquity, and availability (Argenti, 2006). Through a social media platform such as Twitter, any person with an Internet connection can communicate with thousands even millions of people all over the world. Posting a "tweet" on Twitter is analogous to having a news conference with the world. The result of the instantaneous and ubiquitous nature of social media is that crisis management is extremely difficult to do well.

This study set forth three research questions. However, since it is still at its early stage of research, only one research question is addressed, that is to examine the effects of social media on MH 370 organization's crisis communication with the aim to better understand the impact on their crisis communication. However, at the later stage of this study, the researchers are also keen to explore on how social media can help the practice by supplying stakeholders with a ready resource to make sense of a crisis.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social media and relationship

Social media is a broad term that encompasses several types of new media and communication practices. It is difficult to produce an exhaustive list of the many forms social media as social media is continuously evolving. Dykeman (cited in Wigley & Zhang, 2011) describes social media as a place for humans to use Internet and mobile-based tools for sharing and discussing information. Marchese (cited in Wigley & Zhang, 2011) believes social media differs from traditional media because of the way information is discovered, distributed and consumed. Others emphasize that social media differs from traditional media because it is cheaper and more accessible (cited in Wigley & Zhang, 2011).

Some of the more common forms of social media include Weblogs (henceforth "blog"), microblogs, social networks, wikis, and media-sharing sites. Nardi, Whittaker, and Schwarz (2000) called this age the "motto of the Information Age". Because social media is built on relationships, it is worth revisiting what makes a good relationship. In a personal relationship, openness, communication, engagement, and reciprocity are all important factors to developing and maintaining a strong bond and a quality relationship. The same elements can be applied to organizations developing relationships with their stakeholders, whether online or not.

2.2. Crisis communication and participatory news

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, p. 249), "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 in tact".

Part of what makes crisis communication more difficult is the participatory news culture that social media facilitates. With the Internet, news is all pervading and people can and do access their news in multiple formats on multiple platforms on myriad devices. Like other things online, news consumption and even news reporting is becoming a social experience. There has been a dramatic rise in citizen journalism—that is web users who are not professional journalists, contributing directly to the production of the daily news" (Landau, 2011).

2.3. Social media and crisis communication.

Apparently, social media is a medium that mustn't be ignored. Millions of individuals are using social media worldwide and exceedingly comfortable in their online social space. This will likely become ubiquitous in the future and more generations are born into the social media norms (Schrock, 2009). These so-called "digital natives" are quite comfortable with technology however, social media is no longer limited or confined to only young people namely generation Y and generation Z. Baby boomers (generation X) specifically refer to the older adults use social media far less than their younger counterparts, but the rate of social media usage among older adults are growing

exponentially (Madden, 2010). As a result of social media's popularity across generations, social media is becoming a popular venue for marketing, recruitment, and business development and become useful business applications for social media (Weber, 2007), but another parameter that should not be overlooked within this framework is crisis communication. Social media adds a whole new element to crisis communication namely speed and multiplicity of participants. Social media is immediate (instant sharing), ubiquitous (hundreds of millions of people use social media), and available (anyone with an Internet connection can access it). These three things allow crisis instigators and crisis managers to communicate with incredible speed. Interestingly, Crises can be created on social media, and they can be spread on social media. Schultz, Utz, and Goritz (2011) found that organizational blogs and Twitter pages can be very effective means for crisis communication.

3. Methodology

This study describes the effects of social media on crisis communication through an analysis of time line of the missing aircraft MH370 last 8th March 2014 destined to fly from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing and interviews of public relations practitioners.

3.1. Data collection

An online survey investigating PR practitioners' use of social media tools in crisis management was conducted from March through April 2014. Potential respondents were invited from the researchers' public relations industry contacts via e-mail invitation. The sample yielded only eight responses. They were interviewed for general commentary on crisis communication and social media. These participants were guaranteed that their comments will be kept confidential. All participants who were given pseudonym after the participant's name. The sample comprised a convenience sample of the researchers' public relations industry contacts.

3.2. Measurement instruments

The participants each underwent a semi-structured interview based from an interview guide of seven general questions on social media and crisis communication. These questions were open ended by design and allowed the participants to answer as they like.

3.3. Procedures

This study consists of a time line analysis of one crisis case and interviews of public relations practitioners. The selected crisis case was Malaysian Airline System MH370. A timeline was made for the case and this timeline quantitatively measures the speed of communication surrounding each crisis. Several online tools were used to create the time line for instance web sites, blogs and twitter. To complement this quantitative timeline data, this study employed individual in-depth semi structured interviews of eight public relations professionals. Interviewing is a staple of qualitative research and has several advantages, such as the amount of in-depth information and contextualization able to be obtained (Aaker, Kumar, & Day, 1995). All participants underwent a single phone interview lasting 40 to 60 minutes. The interviews consisted of open-ended question. On the informed consent forms, there was an option to allow the researchers to record the interview. Where permission was granted, the researcher recorded the interview to aid and facilitate in note taking.

4. Results and discussions

4.1. Demographics

Eight individuals (six females and two males) were interviewed for this study. They are senior professionals in the public relation fields. All interviews were conducted between March 15th, 2014 and 28th March, 2014. The

researcher contacted 15 individuals however only 8 individuals agreed to participate in the study. After four interviews the data was repeating itself. Thus, the researcher felt "there was enough data to address the one and only research question in this preliminary study.

4.2. Interview themes

The participants answers tended to coalesce around certain themes. Three themes that emerged were identified from the interview data analysis are:

Theme 1: Social media is changing crisis communication due to its attributes
Theme 2: Basic communication principles must be applied to social media
Theme 3: Online communities' news must adhere to the communication principles

4.3. Findings

- Theme 1: Social media is changing crisis communication due to its attributes (immediacy, ubiquity, and availability).

There was almost an agreement that social media has brought considerable change to the corporate communication field, crisis communication as well as external communications in general. The two major changes social media has brought (and eventually continues to bring) as agreed by the participants are speed and a loss of control. Thus in turn the participants concurred that social media is becoming powerful for crisis communicators. Participant A noted that:

...with internet connection, social media allows us to talk to group of many peoples as well as one-to-one communication" On a macro level, social media has changed external communications by speeding up or accelerating the whole process. The accelerating property of social media was noted by most of the participants. Participants C noted how social media has made "joint effort and sharing of data at a very quick time and more feasible in real time.

Organizations are losing control over their brands, their reputations, and their messaging and this concurs by Landau (2011). Participant B mentioned the loss of control via social media saying: "any person that goes on line can publish anything they wish…they adhere to their individual source and need not necessarily confine to journalistic integrity. So we can anticipate some ill-informed information's and who can control them. With Internet around, there is a lot of publication freedom…people post on tweeter, facebook and blog…tell me how to control them?"

The technology used in social media allows for spontaneous and instantaneous speed. Almost all the participants discussed how the speed of social media is changing the communication landscape. Participant E summed up social media's effects by saying, "social media has superpower in conveying messages at tremendous speed," and continued saying that "social media has had two effects or influence on crisis communications. Firstly it allows companies and others to get their messages out to end users and stakeholders terribly fast and secondly it's very easy for misinformation to multiply either to initiate a crisis in a crisis or to make it even worst."

- Theme 2: Basic communication principles must be applied to social media.

Although social media is changing various aspects of the corporate communication landscape but not all is changing. There was a general agreement among many of the participants that even though the tools were changing, the basic principles of communication must be applied. Participant B said it well when noted:

Traditionally how the printed media works….They have news and even if they couldn't publish in newspapers, they could always resort to other mediums such as pamphlets, newsletter or to get it

printed. They even adopted door-to door distribution in delivering the news. Now..the same goes to online communities, netizens, people who writes in blog ...they are doing the same thing. It only differs in the medium used! In fact it only takes a second or even less to distribute the message/news.

This finding concurs to what Landau (2011) found when he mentioned that there are people out there with a message, with an issue they want to talk about, and they just can do it so much faster today. Basically the same principle in communication applies and the only different is the time taken to do so

- Theme 3: Online communities' news must adhere to the communication principles

A good crisis communicator could accommodate and anticipate how social media would affect a crisis. If crisis communicators can anticipate the effects of social media on a crisis, then they should also be able to react to social media during the crisis. Since social media is built on community and relationships, the best way to anticipate social media's effects on a crisis and to react to social media in a crisis is to engage social media (Landau, 2011). Participant C explained that organizations needed to build relationships before a crisis hits and that would not be limited only to building relationships via social media. As Participant D noted, "we must integrate social media as part of medium in an organization's communication channels. Such concerted effort would make people not see this as crisis communication; they would just see it as communication that happened to be during a crisis."

5. Conclusion

Today, social media has become an integral part of communication behavior and organizations cannot ignore social media in their crisis communications any longer. With social media presence being integrated and embedded in our everyday life, the field of communication such as internal, external and corporate communication have also been revolutionized. What makes the social media more powerful than the printed media is its attributes.

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