

Perspectives of Public Relations Practitioners on the Effects of Social media on Crisis Communication

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Abstract

The study assesses the effects of social media on crisis communication from the perspective of selected public relations practitioners. A qualitative inquiry was used to elicit information from five public relations managers from five organisations in the Kumasi metropolis. The emergent themes from the study were interpreted within situational crisis communication theory. The results showed that basic communication principles have not changed with the emergent of social media but it has changed crisis communication by bringing speed and loss of control to the way crisis is communicated or brought to the public domain. The results imply that social media provides managers with a useful means of responding to crisis and it should feature in crisis communication strategies. Future studies should consider the quantitative perspectives.

Keywords: crisis communication, social media, Twitter, Facebook, public relations practitioners

Introduction

The practice of having interactions and sharing information among friends, colleagues, members of a group, members of a community or organisation has long been in existence. Macias, Hilyard & Freimuth (2009) acknowledge that even though the practice of social media is not new, the particular types of social media in use today are innovative. Advances in computer-mediated

communication technology have facilitated the development and deployment of various communication tools which have also affected human communication behaviour considerably (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Kenix, 2009). Changes in communication behaviour and practices have profound implications for corporate communicators, especially in the area of crisis communications (Argenti, 2006). Social media has radically changed the landscape of corporate communication. There are three factors that make social media a powerful force: immediacy, ubiquity, and availability. Immediacy refers to how social media facilitates instantaneous information sharing and ubiquity considers its reach (Rainie, Purcell, & Smith, 2011). Social media facilitates smooth information dissemination (Lenhart & Fox, 2009; Madden, 2010) and is accessible (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; Lenhart, 2009).

The ease of accessibility and availability of information on social media poses a challenge to the concept of ownership in that once the information is online, anyone can access it. This situation forces organisations to react extraordinarily quickly to incidents, events, etc. that are now reported in minutes and seconds (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2010). Through social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, anyone can communicate with thousands or millions of people all over the world in a matter of seconds (Fox, Zickuhr, & Smith, 2009; Lenhart & Fox, 2009). Posting a "tweet" on Twitter is synonymous to having a news conference with the world. The impact of the speed and ease of information dissemination on social media outlets makes it gruelling for managers as they seek to manage crises. The lack of speed and agility on the part of any organisation to respond to the content of social media puts the organisation at a disadvantage, especially in a crisis communication situation. Such an organisation may assume a defensive position while a proactive organisation that responds quickly to a crisis has a far better chance of protecting itself and salvaging its reputation (Argenti, 2006; Gonzalez -Herrero & Smith, 2010).

There is the continuous need to understand how organisations are responding to dramatic changes in the means of communication, especially crisis

communication. Very little information exists, especially from the Ghanaian perspective. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to use the experiences of public relations practitioners to explore the effects of social media on crisis communication.

Theoretical concepts of social media and crisis communication

Social media platforms allow readers, listeners, and viewers to participate in creating and sharing content, unlike the traditional media which delivers content but readers and listeners do not participate in the creation or development of content. Social networks are perhaps the most popular form of social media. Boyd & Ellison (2008) defined social networks as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Schrock (2009) has indicated that young people are exceedingly comfortable in their online social space and are likely to get even more comfortable with it as time goes on. These “digital natives” are quite comfortable with technology and are massively deploying it for various purposes (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). A decade ago, social media usage among older adults was predicted to grow exponentially (Lenhart, 2009; Tulgan, 2007; Weber, 2007). The availability of social media makes social media a viable option for crisis communication and the authors Schultz, Utz & Goritz (2011) found out that organisational blogs and twitter pages are effective means for communicating a crisis. Seltzer and Mitrook (2007) found that blogs have huge dialogic potential for organisations due to the nature and design of blogs as well as the social expectations placed on bloggers by the blogging culture. The dialogic potential of blogs together with their interactivity can be harnessed to facilitate communication with the public. Additionally, social media allows for fast and easy diffusion of messages. Just as an organisation can communicate quickly to the world with social media, so can everyone else, whether they are members of the media, disgruntled

customers or random web vandals make their opinion public (Falkheimer & Heide, 2009).

Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) forms the framework for this study as it provides the foundation for addressing crisis situations from a strategic perspective. The theory posits that crisis managers should match strategic crisis responses to the level of crisis responsibility and the reputational threat posed by a crisis (Coombs 2006). SCCT consists of three core elements: the crisis situation, crisis response strategies and matching the situation and crisis response strategies. In line with this theory, and in addressing the crisis through the social media, public relations practitioners are expected to first make a judgment on whether a particular situation, incidence or occurrence constitutes a crisis. If it does, the next thing to do is to design a crisis response strategy and finally to match this against the crisis. This approach implies that the response strategy adopted in times of a crises situation is determined by the nature of the crisis at hand.

In this study, the experiences of public relations practitioners on social media and crises communication are interpreted within this conceptual framework.

Method

Given the need to explore and interpret the experiences of practitioners this study employed a qualitative mode of inquiry. The approach provides the opportunity to know peoples experiences with a research issue (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with five (5) public relation practitioners and officers of five public organizations in the Kumasi metropolis. They were contacted via e-mail and interview appointments were set at a time and location of their convenience. The interview sessions lasted 30 to 45 minutes and were recorded using an audio recorder and later transcribed for analysis. The respondents were asked open-ended questions on their assessment of the effects of social media on crisis communication in their organisations. The interview data were analysed by manually summarising and categorising the content of the raw

data into codes, and emergent patterns developed into themes. Quotes were used to illustrate the findings of the themes.

Results and discussion

The results are presented and then the themes that emerged discussed. The themes include crisis communication before social media, effects of social media on communication and crisis communication using social media.

Crisis communication before social media

All the respondents agreed that they made use of the traditional media such as radio, print, television to address crisis before the emergence of social media. There was general agreement among the respondents that even though the tools are changing the basic principles of communication still apply. One respondent stated that:

"we have a good rapport with the media especially the radio stations who contact us to know our views on a particular crisis'.

Also, press statements are issued to the various media houses as part of the means of addressing the crisis. A practitioner noted that:

"in addition to using traditional media, community durbars were used to inform people about the crisis; we also visited churches and schools to disseminate information to and sometimes we met organised unions to inform them about a crisis and how we intend to deal with them"

Effects of social media on crisis communication

There was an agreement among the respondents that social media has changed crisis communication considerably. Specifically, the respondents indicated that the two changes social media has brought (and continues to bring) to crisis communication are speed and a loss of control. It is a double-

edged sword: on the one hand, social media is allowing organisations and others to get their messages out to end users, and stakeholders fast, but on the contrary, it is easy for misinformation to proliferate, either to initiate a crisis or to make it worse. One respondent noted that:

“social media has created a whole new line of media that we can deal with, and it enables us to talk to groups of people as well as individuals.”

Another respondent said:

“we now reach more people, and within three months of setting up our Facebook we got about 20 million likes”.

However, organisations are losing control over their brands, their reputations, and their messaging. The loss of control that organisations are facing is partly due to the participatory news culture that social media facilitates. Besides this, social media (especially, through Twitter) also allows for a constant and near-instantaneous news cycle. The interviewees asserted that the basic principles of crisis communication still apply to social media; social media is just a new tool to communicate with (a very powerful tool). This view is similar to previous findings (Schultz, Utz, & Goritz, 2011). The speed of social media is causing another problem: misinformation. Participants mentioned how the speed of social media is affecting the accuracy of news reporting and crisis communicators must respond quickly. In the midst of a crisis, social media can help an organization get its message out, as one participant explained:

“social media can be helpful in alerting an organization to a crisis and also an opportunity for enhancing the reputation of the organization”.

Besides serving as an early warning system, social media can also help an organization build up its relationship equity.

Addressing crisis communication through social media

Participants noted that engaging in social media is very important and that organizations must start engaging their stakeholders and other online influencers before a crisis occurs. They also felt that a good crisis communicator should anticipate how social media would affect a crisis and respond accordingly, in real time with social media when it does. 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. This observation accords with previous views on crisis communication plans (Coombs, 1995; Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2010; Jaques, 2008; Massey & Larsen, 2006; Ulmer, 2001). Organizations must recognize the reality that it is not only possible but indeed probable that they will eventually be hit with a crisis. Previous research confirms the importance of a rapid response by the organization in a crisis, and there is no more rapid a response than a real-time response (Argenti, 2006; Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2010). Social media operates in real time 24/7, and organizations must learn to respond in real time ((Rainie, Purcell, & Smith, 2011). The practitioners also recognised, similar to previous reports, the decline in the use of the mass communication model (Baran & Davis, 2008; Maisel, 1973; Napoli, 2009, Self, 2009). Where organizations once relied on mass communication to disseminate messages, today, a more relational approach is needed. Mass communication still has a role; however, it should not be the only way an organization communicates with its stakeholders (Falkheimer & Heide, 2009). Social media is based on two-way, relational communication and this was a common theme in the interviews. One of the participants noted that:

“An organisation can no longer just disseminate information and hope it sticks... there is the need to listen and to do follow-up and social media is an excellent avenue for this”.

The practitioners also observed that crisis communication as a whole has dramatically accelerated, probably due to the accelerated news cycle and the democratisation that social media allows (Argenti, 2006; Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2010; Hale, Dulek, & Hale, 2005). Purcell et al. (2010) and

Ruellan (2007) have both discussed the rise of citizen journalism and this study adds to their findings. One participant noted that:

“ if you are properly engaged, and you understand who is watching, and with whom your company is engaged, you are going to know what the reach is... should this organization be surprised by the way people reacted to the recent crisis?.. they should have known what kind of mess they were getting into.”

A participant summarised the general view by indicating that:

“we may not know where the story is coming from because a blog is created every second of every day, but you can get a good idea of the concerns of stakeholders... a good crisis communicator would have an understanding of how stories unfold because most of the stories have all been told before in some form or another and there is a predictable response pattern that often takes place”.

Conclusion

The study provides a practitioner perspective and concludes that social media has changed crisis communication by bringing speed and loss of control, and that organisations can proactively anticipate and respond to a crisis through the use of social media.

Recommendation

The study has shown that social media is changing the landscape for crisis communication and requires that managers must invest and make use of the platforms to proactively manage crisis situations. The study was qualitative, and a quantitative study is needed to provide a robust measure of the effect of social media on crisis communication. Future studies may also examine and probably compare the use of specific social media platforms, for example, Facebook, Flickr, and YouTube, in crisis communication.

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