

Crisis Communication Through Social Media

Mini Systematic Review

Todd R. Walton

University of Maryland University College

DMGT 835 9041

Dr. K. Collins

December 10, 2016

For organizations, crisis is inevitable. Whether natural disasters, acts of terrorism, industrial accidents, or employee scandals, the only certainty is that every organization will, at some point, respond to a crisis. Whether or not an organization will deal with a crisis successfully is greatly dependent on its crisis response communication plan.

Crises fall into two categories: organizational crises, and disasters (Coombs, T, 2015, p. 2). Disasters are large scale events that disrupt all aspects of daily operations and require response from government (p. 3). Disasters can lead to organizational crisis and thereby require immediate action. Organizational crises are unpredictable events that endanger “important expectancies of stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental and economic issues, and seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (p. 3).

Prior to, during, and immediately following a crisis, stakeholders attempt to communicate with one another in order to understand the situation and gain a sense of control (Lin, Spence, Sellnow, & Lachlan, 2016, p. 601). Social media, as a tool for crisis communication is only beginning to realize its potential (p. 601).

Organizational managers have long understood the importance of crisis planning. Organizations that are not prepared for crises have more at stake than at any time before (Coombs, 2015, p. 12). Mismanagement of a crisis event has been viewed by managers as leading to “decrease in revenue, cutbacks and/or layoffs, loss of corporate reputation, increased media scrutiny, [and ...] decreased share price [...]” (p. 12). A comprehensive crisis management program (CCMP), that includes a crisis decision-making process as well as crisis communication and reputation management, is an organizational requirement for modern organizations (p. 1).

Crisis managers utilize strategies to communicate during crisis. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) has led to a series of crisis communication strategies that have become widely used by crisis managers (Coombs, 2015, p. 144).

The purpose of this study is to better understand how the use of social media by organizations impacts communication during crisis. Since social media has become an effective tool for organizations to reach their stakeholders, this information will assist crisis managers in determining the best practice with regards to social media for crisis communication. This will be accomplished by exploring the mechanisms that have enabled social media to emerge as the dominant mode of organizational communication during crisis. This study is not focused on strategies of crisis communication, as these have been thoroughly defined and examined through Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2015).

Methods

To understand how social media impacts organizational crisis communication, it is important to understand the mechanisms that have brought social media to the forefront of crisis communication. Realist synthesis is a method of synthesis that helps to explain how specific mechanisms operating in different contexts affect an outcome. In order to identify the mechanisms related to social media's impact on crisis communication, a detailed search of the extant literature was conducted to find relevant studies. The search strategy and inclusion criteria will be discussed later in the methods section of this review.

Each article was coded using Timothy Coombs (2015) crisis response strategies: 1) attack; 2) deny; 3) find a scapegoat; 4) excuse; 5) justify; 6) compensate; 7) apologize; 8) remind; 9) ingratiate, and; 10) show victimage (p. 148). These crisis response strategies, or variations, have been used successfully by organizations for decades. Scanning the studies with

these codes revealed that these crisis strategies are still widely in use and remain wholly unchanged. While these strategies are still in use, mechanisms of use have changed; in other words, social media has changed how these strategies are employed during crisis. Rereading the data set with these codes, revealed that organizations are being held accountable during crisis through the use of social media by various stakeholders. The mechanism of responsibility, and how social media has forced organizations to become more transparent and accountable was added to the list of codes. It also became clear that social media enables stakeholders to reach a larger audience at a much greater speed than traditional media; which provides stakeholders with a voice that was not present prior to the use of social media.

A second round of coding was conducted using the mechanisms of: responsibility with sub codes of transparency and accountability; broad reach; multi-directional communication with sub codes of voice, connections, and crowdsourcing; and speed (See figure 1).

Figure 1

Code Count for all Media

Media	Broad Reach	Multi-directional	Connections	Crowdsourcing	Voice	Responsibility	Accountability	Transparency	Speed	Totals
WEB2.0Howsocialmediaapplications	29	10	3	1	1	5	2	4	27	82
Understandingtheuseofsocialmedia.	10	8			17	5	9	17	9	75
Thereal-timepowerofTwitter.docx	29	9	12		20	1	3	2	17	93
Theparacrisis.docx	21	1	5	4	9	10	14	3	10	77
TheImpactofUsingSocialMediaasaC	13	5	4		3	2	6		8	41
Sportsfansascrisiscommunicators.do	8		6	2	16		1		2	35
Readingtheriots.docx	19	10		8	5	6	1	1	13	63
Parodysocialmediaaccounts.docx	6		3		13	4	10	4	3	43
Howpublicusesocialmedia.docx			2	1	2		1		1	7
CrisisCommunicationLearningandRe	7	6	4		9	4	4		3	37
Totals	142	49	39	16	95	37	51	31	93	

The results of this round of coding indicate that these mechanisms are present in every case (See figure 1). Furthermore, it can be theorized that prior to the advent of social media, individual stakeholders did not have the voice or the reach (mechanisms) to hold organizations accountable. This change in the dynamic of crisis communication relates directly to this review's research question.

Research Question/Search Strategy

In order to better understand the mechanisms that enable social media to impact organizational crisis communication, the following research question was posed: *How does social media impact organizational communication during crisis?* Search terms related to organizational crisis communication and social media were identified:

- Social media
- Communication
- Crisis management/ communication during
- Organizational communication
- Crisis decision-making

An initial search using the search string: social media AND crisis AND communication, was run on UMUC's library OneSearch, which includes 45 databases, the most relevant of which are Business Source Complete, ScienceDirect, and SocINDEX. The search was limited to full text articles in scholarly journals only. This initial search revealed 1, 575 studies, but most importantly, one specific article which matched the focus of this review: *Understanding the use of Social Media by organizations for Crisis Communication* (Roshan, Warren, & Carr, 2016). This article led to the discovery of Coombs' (2015) Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

By limiting the database search to full-text scholarly, peer reviewed journals between 2009 and 2016, and using the Roshan, Warren, & Carr (2016) article as a starting point, the following search string was developed:

Social media AND cris AND Commun* AND Organization NOT Community*

This search resulted in 308 articles, which was further reduced to 124 after duplicates and redundant data sets were removed. Following the application of the Inclusion/exclusion criteria 10 articles were kept for analysis.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Due to the nature of the study of crises, case studies proliferate the extant literature. The homogeneity of the research precludes the inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative research studies, as suggested by Pawson et al. (2004). Additionally, since social media is a recent phenomenon, only articles published after 2009 were included in the research for this review. From this body of research evidence, three inclusion criteria were identified and applied to answer the research question: (1) studies must include social media as the communication mechanism rather than the wider mainstream media; (2) studies had to show that social media had some impact on the outcome of the crisis; (3) crises within the studies must match one of Timothy Coombs (2012) definitions of crisis.

Quality Appraisal

To determine the relevance of each case study included in this review, it is necessary to evaluate the quality and fitness for purpose for each study. TAPUPAS (Pawson, Boaz, Grayson, Long, & Barnes, 2003) is the quality assessment tool used in this review for its comprehensive and straightforward approach. For this review, each study has been graded on a four-point scale (4=highest rating, 1=lowest rating) in each of 7 categories: (1) transparency- is it open to scrutiny?; (2) accuracy- is it well grounded?; (3) purposivity- is it fit for purpose?; (4) utility- is it fit for use?; (5) propriety- is it legal and ethical?; (6) accessibility- is it intelligible?; (7) specificity- does it meet source-specific standards? (p. 2). Utilizing the generic standards

defined by Pawson et al. (2003, p.9) each article was evaluated in each category. A four-point scale based on these generic standards was used (See table 1). Since some of the studies in this review focused more on the outcome of a particular crisis, and not on social media's impact, special attention was given to category 3, fitness for purpose.