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Effects of the Online World on Crisis Communication and Crisis Management

The word *revolution* is often used in reference to the Internet and crisis communication. Revolution does capture your attention and sells people on seminars for improving crisis communication, but it is an overstatement. It is more appropriate to think of the Internet as hastening the evolution of crisis communication. Let's start by refining what we mean by the Internet. The Internet is many communication channels, not just one. These channels include Web sites, discussion boards, blogs, microblogs, chat rooms, Listservs, image sharing, and social networking sites, to name but a few. Internet communication channels emphasize the interactive and interconnected nature of the Internet. Users can find information, connect with other users, and express their concerns more easily with the Internet than with traditional communication channels. We should remember that people did essentially the same communication tasks prior to the Internet. However, it took more time, effort, and resources to accomplish them.

The Internet is an important evolutionary step in crisis communication, rather than a revolution. Crisis managers still face the same needs to identify warning signs, confront the same basic communication demands, utilize the same concepts, and must enact effective strategic responses. Crisis managers need to identify warning signs in order to prevent crises and/or limit the damage from an emerging crisis. What has changed is how the information is collected and, in some cases,

how that information is processed. Crisis managers are faced with the demand to create a quick and accurate response. What has changed is what constitutes "quick" and how that initial response is delivered. Crisis management plans (CMPs) and crisis teams still compose the heart of the crisis management effort. What has changed is how CMPs are stored and accessed and how team members interact with one another (see Chapters 5 and 6). Crisis managers must weight key crisis factors and devise an appropriate and effective crisis response. What has changed are the ways of identifying critical crisis information and how their messages are delivered. This chapter highlights key ways in which the Internet is affecting crisis communication and crisis management. Many of these are developed further in later chapters.

Let's begin with a short discussion of the online environment, which provides the context for appreciating this environment's effects on crisis communication. I'll then highlight the effects of social media on crisis communication organized by the three phases of crisis management.

■ THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT: MULTIPLE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

We cannot have a discussion about the Internet's effects on crisis communication and management without first discussing the online environment itself. This will be a very basic discussion given that crisis, not the online environment, is the focus of this book. Organizations entered the online world, and thus created an online presence, with the use of Web pages. Taylor and Kent (2007) led the initial research investigating whether and how Web sites were used in a crisis. They observed how important it was to incorporate Web sites into crisis communication efforts as more and more stakeholders were utilizing this channel during a crisis (Taylor & Perry, 2005). Practitioners have embraced this advice, though many organizations still make no mention of a crisis on their Web sites. Web sites, however, were just the beginning of the online communication tools that would shape current crisis communication and management thinking.

Web sites generally reflect Web 1.0 rather than Web 2.0. Web 2.0 refers to applications that promote user-generated content, sharing of that content, and collaboration to create content. Web 2.0 promotes interaction and allows users to create Web content (O'Reilly, 2005). Corporate Web sites primarily distribute content (Web 1.0) rather than promote the creation and sharing of content. Web 2.0 was the foundation for social

media. Social media is a collection of online technologies that allow users to share insights, experiences, and opinions with one another. The sharing can be in the form of text, audio, video, or multimedia (Safko & Brake, 2009). Social media is responsible for the growing link between crisis communication/management and the online world. Social media is an evolutionary stimulus because users, not organizations or the traditional news media, now control the creation and distribution of information. Users bypass the traditional information gatekeepers. It is important to refine our understanding of social media before exploring its effects on crisis communication/management.

Social media is a collection of online communication channels/tools that share five common characteristics: (1) participation: anyone can create and give feedback on content, (2) openness: most social media permits people to post content and feedback, (3) conversation: it facilitates two-way interaction, (4) communities: groups with similar interests can form quickly, and (5) connectedness: there is heavy utilization of links to other content (Voit, 2008). Note how interactivity is the key factor connecting the five characteristics. These characteristics are self-explanatory, but community warrants further attention. One of the original qualities of the Internet that attracted public relations people was the way online communities formed. *Online communities* can be defined as groups of people with similar goals or interests that connect with one another and exchange information using Web tools (Owyang, 2007). Social media has increased the speed and ease with which online communities form. Online communities can be collections of important stakeholders for an organization. The comments and actions of these communities, in turn, can have a significant effect on an organization. Negative online comments can threaten valuable reputational assets (dna13, 2010; Oneupweb, 2007). That potential to affect organizations is what makes online communities and social media so important to crisis communication/management. An example will help to illustrate the point.

On May 6, 2010, Pampers, a product of Procter & Gamble, issued a news release with the title *Pampers Calls Rumors Completely False*. Here is an excerpt from the news release that summarizes the situation:

> Jodi Allen, Vice President for Pampers, said, "For a number of weeks, Pampers has been a subject of growing but completely false rumors fueled by social media that its new Dry Max diaper causes rashes and other skin irritations. These rumors are being perpetuated by a small number of parents, some of whom are unhappy that we replaced our older Cruisers and Swaddlers products while others support competitive products and the use of cloth diapers. Some have specifically sought to

promote the myth that our product causes 'chemical burns.' We have comprehensively and thoroughly investigated these and other claims and have found no evidence whatsoever that the reported conditions were in any way caused by materials in our product. Independent physicians, highly respected in the field, have analyzed our data and have confirmed our conclusions." (para. 1)

Parents were making online comments that Pampers's new version of its product was harming infants. That is a serious charge for a company trying to sell diapers to parents. Parents do not want to buy a product that will hurt their children. Social media (e.g., blogs, microblogs, social networking sites) was the route for spreading the "rumor." The popular social networking site Facebook is a prime example of social media fanning the rumor. A discussion thread on a Pampers page appeared, claiming that Pampers created severe diaper rash, which even included blistering. The Facebook page had over 10,000 members, many of whom were parents who posted their concerns and experiences on the page. Pampers has its own Facebook page with over 100,000 fans, and even that page had parents posting stories of bad reactions to new Pampers under the discussion heading "New Pampers are HORRIBLE!" (the discussion thread is no longer available online). Pampers did respond to those concerns. Here is an exchange:

Sherrie Lejeune: I know I'm going to get a lot of flak for this, but oh well. I want to let people know my experience.

I've been using Pampers on my daughter since she was born in Oct. 08. I never had a problem with them and LOVED them. The softness of them was what made me use them at first. Then it was the absorbancy. My daughter has sensitive skin and everything else made her breakout besides Pampers and Huggies. And I didn't like Huggies because of the stiffness.

When the new Pampers came out Avagail was wearing the Cruisers and I had no clue they changed. I bought a box and it looked EXACTLY the same as the ones I was buying before. When we opened the box to start using them we noticed right away that they were different. They were REALLY thin and didn't feel as soft, but I tried them anyway.

Avagail started getting rashes RIGHT away. And when I say rashes, I mean REALLY BAD rashes. I change her

right when I notice she's gone. Usually a minute or two after she's gone because I know her cues. Her rashes were blistering and bleeding. And when I'd get them to clear up they'd come right back. I started asking around and found out a LOT of people were having the same problem with their children.

We switched over to Huggies Little Movers and Huggies Overnight and we haven't had rashes like that since.

To the pampers people: You REALLY need to look into this. This is NOT an isolated problem. It's happening to a LOT of parents.

Pampers: Hi Sherrie. You definitely won't get flak from us for sharing your experience. We appreciate it, but I'm just so sorry to hear about Avagail's rashes, as well as Colleen's children and Kat's baby.

Please do understand that we thoroughly evaluate our diapers to ensure they are safe and gentle on your little one's skin. Although I'll be passing this information along to our Health & Safety Division, I really hope that you, Kat, and Colleen get in touch with us directly at 1-866-586-5654. We're available M–F, 9–6, EST.

Anne—I'll be sure to share your feedback with our Quality Control Team. We'd love you to give them another try since you had trouble with the tabs. Just get in touch with us at the same number and we can offer some help.

Pampers was reaching out to people expressing their concerns via social media. Pampers even held a summit with four influential "mommy bloggers," women who blog about consumer products intended for family use: Renee Bigner, Kate Marsh Lord, Tiffany Snedaker, and Stephanie Manner Wagner. The summit was a chance for Pampers and independent experts to provide information about the situation and to dispel the rumor. The four bloggers agreed that after the meeting they had greater confidence in the diapers (Sewell, 2010). Managers do consider negative information appearing in social media as legitimate threats to the reputations of the organizations, the reputation of products, and the sales of those products. In other words, social media can be a warning sign for a problem that has the opportunity to grow into a full-scale crisis.

Social media is a broad term that covers a variety of different online communication tools. Developing a comprehensive list of social media is like trying to count sand on the beach. New tools keep emerging, so you cannot have a complete and comprehensive list. But we can construct a system for categorizing the various types of social media. A category system is functional for crisis communication. By understanding how the different categories can be used in crisis communication, crisis managers can understand how to use any of the individual tools within the category. There are many different ways to categorize social media. Table 2.1 presents a synthesis of various lists along with definitions of the categories. True to the interconnected nature of the Internet, the categories are often used in combination with one another, making it appear as though they overlap. However, each category does have distinctive features that separate it from the others. They all possess the basic ability to share information and opinions with other users.

Table 2.1   Social Media Categories

Social networks	Individual Web pages from which people share content and communicate with friends (Examples: Facebook, MySpace, Bebo)
Blogs	Online journals where people post content and others can comment on it
Wikis	Web pages where people work together to create and edit content (Example: Wikipedia)
Podcast	Audio and video content created and distributed through a subscription based service (Example: The Executive Lounge With Andrew Coffey)
Forums	Online discussions revolving around specific interests and topics
Content communities	Places where people organize themselves around specific content that they create and comment on (Examples: YouTube, Flickr)
Microblogs	Sites on which people share small amounts of information through posts (Example: Twitter)
Aggregators	Tools that collect content (e.g., news stories, blogs) from different sites in one site; content is frequently ranked by popularity and can include comments from users (Example: Google Reader)
Social bookmarking	Tool with which people share and rate content they have found online (Example: Delicious)

It is important to realize that social media is dominated by user-created content. This means stakeholders are accustomed to being in control. It follows that basic ideas from traditional media relations do not and should not be applied. It is easy to find online rants about how public relations people pitch bloggers just like they pitch the traditional news media. Social media is about interaction and control, not being fed information. I make this point because crisis communicators must be savvy if they are to use social media strategically. Keep in mind that the primary values of social media are *listening* to what stakeholders are saying, not in sending them information, and providing *access* to information when stakeholders might need it. Listening and access will be used to illustrate the potential value of social media to crisis managers by coupling it with the steps of crisis management.

■ EFFECTS ON CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Social media has a variety of effects on crisis communication. The three stages of crisis management provide a useful framework for organizing the discussion of these effects. This section reviews key effects that are discussed in later chapters.

Precrisis

Listening is what scanning for crisis warning signs is all about. Social media provides an opportunity for finding warning signs generated by stakeholders. Blogs, microblogs, content communities, social networks, forums, aggregators, and social bookmarking are all excellent scanning tools for crisis managers. The challenge is wading through the vast amounts of information to locate emerging trends that appear ready to develop into crises, a point we will return to in Chapter 4. Not every online statement or video is really a potential crisis. However, the nature of the Internet is that ideas from seemingly unimportant sources can spread rapidly, thereby creating the potential for a crisis. This concern is rooted in the big-seed approach to viral messages.

The big seed is used in contrast to the small-seed notion of how ideas spread on the Internet—how a message becomes viral. The small-seed concept argues that only a few influential people need to spread the message for an idea to emerge online (Thompson, 2008). Duncan Watts, a network researcher at Yahoo!, has used computer modeling to show that average people are the most likely source for a successful viral message. In the big-seed approach, a large number of people

(seeds) are targeted with the initial message. There is a mass effort to reach a broad spectrum of the target audience rather than identifying a few influentials. Watts and Peretti (2007) argue that any individual from the mass audience can create the viral spread of a message. Hence, crisis managers cannot just monitor what influential stakeholders are saying but must be attuned to a wide array of stakeholders. It is helpful at this point to introduce the idea of a paracrisis.

The term *para* means resembling or protection from something. A paracrisis resembles a crisis because it threatens the organization's reputation and related assets. However, a paracrisis would not require the activation of the crisis team and does not disrupt the organization. Still, a paracrisis warrants attention because neglect or mismanagement could create an actual crisis. A paracrisis is a specific type of crisis warning sign. It mimics a crisis itself. Motrin's offensive ad to mothers is an example of a paracrisis. In 2008, Motrin created an edgy ad that noted how mothers have back pain from using sling-type baby carriers. The ad was in print and online in video form. Many mothers were offended by it and took to social media to express their outrage. Twitter was a popular location for mothers to attack Motrin. There was even a nine-minute YouTube video featuring the Twitter complaints. The ad appeared online on a Saturday morning. The social media criticism stormed Twitter by Saturday evening. On the following Monday, McNeil Consumer Healthcare, the makers of Motrin, removed the ad from the Internet and replaced it with an apology (Tsouderos, 2008). McNeil Consumer Healthcare did not see any disruption in the production or sale of Motrin. There was minor damage to the corporate and product reputation that had the potential to escalate if the paracrisis was not handled swiftly and effectively. By removing the ad and apologizing, McNeil Consumer Healthcare managed the paracrisis, thereby defusing a potential crisis.

Paracrises that emerge in social media are unique crisis warning signs because they appear in full view of stakeholders. Typically, crisis prevention efforts are invisible to stakeholders. For instance, organizations revise safety procedures or replace a dangerous chemical to reduce the threat of hazardous chemical releases. Visibility is what gives a paracrisis its impact. The public appearance of the paracrisis demands public management. Managers must explain to all stakeholders what is being done to address the concern or why they are choosing to ignore it. The paracrisis blurs the line between precrisis and crisis response because addressing the paracrisis can appear to be a crisis response rather than preventative action. The key point here is that social media increases the visibility and number

of paracrises because the Internet can highlight the stakeholder concerns that drive paracrises.

Crisis Response

It is very easy to find an online webinar or physical seminar where "experts" will tell you how to use the online environment to manage a crisis. The "selling" of online crisis communication creates the illusion that traditional media no longer matter. In fact, overusing online crisis communication is a dangerous delusion. Media selection must be driven by your target audience. Crisis managers select communication channels that effectively and efficiently reach the desired target audience. If online channels are relevant to your stakeholders during a crisis, then add online channels to the mix. However, crisis managers must integrate the online and traditional communication channels into a seamless and consistent crisis response (Wehr, 2007). Above all, crisis managers must use online channels strategically rather than just because someone said they should (Oneupweb, 2007).

I argue there are three basic rules when using online crisis communication channels: (1) be present, (2) be where the action is, and (3) be there before the crisis. *Be present* means that crisis managers should not hide from the online world. Stakeholders, including the news media, will look to the corporate Web site and existing social media activities of an organization for information. If the crisis is never mentioned in the organization's online communication, the absence will be noticeable. The organization will be criticized for being silent and miss the opportunity to present its interpretation of the crisis. Chapter 8 returns to the importance of presenting the organization's side of the crisis.

Be where the action is refers to using the online origins of the crisis as one location for the crisis response messages (dna13, 2010). If the crisis began as a YouTube video, then YouTube should be one of the places where the crisis response appears. Domino's Pizza followed that advice when its CEO posted an apology on YouTube after a disgusting video of Domino's employees supposedly tampering with food was posted on YouTube. If the crisis breaks on Facebook, then the organization's Facebook page should address the crisis. Will the CEO's message about the crisis be popular or viewed as much as the crisis-inducing video? Will the organization have as many favorable comments as its critics do? The answer is clearly no, but placing the message in the source channel increases the likelihood of people encountering your message along with the crisis-inducing message.

Be there before the crisis means that implementing a social media push after a crisis is less effective than if the organization was already utilizing social media. Social networking sites, blogs, and microblogs are most effective when there are followers—people viewing the content regularly. Having an existing presence builds credibility and authenticity for your crisis messages. When American Airlines and Southwest Airlines had to ground planes for safety inspections, both used blogs to discuss the problem. Prior to the crisis, Southwest had a popular blog called *Nuts About Southwest*. American had no blog. Southwest used its blog to help inform passengers and answer their questions. There were quickly over 140 responses after the first crisis post by Southwest. When American started a blog after the crisis, stakeholders did not know about it and virtually no one accessed it. American did nothing to promote the blog, including no link from its corporate Web site. Eventually American dropped the blog. American's experience demonstrates that arriving late to the social media game is problematic (Holtz, 2007). However, there is still value in starting to use social media after a crisis because of the need to be where the action is. Crisis managers must never forget the strategic aspect of the crisis response (Martine, 2007). The nature of the crisis plays a critical role in strategic choices about the selection of social media options to deliver a crisis response, a point developed in Chapter 8.

Postcrisis

Stakeholders may still require follow-up information and updates after the crisis is officially over. Social media provides another channel for delivering the updates and addressing specific follow-up questions stakeholders may have. Crisis managers will need to determine how long to keep special crisis Web pages or blogs operational. One criterion would be to decommission such sites when interest wanes. Managers may want to move past the special crisis pages and blogs as another sign that the crisis is over. That is when social media can be valuable. Microblogs, such as Twitter, provide excellent outlets for updates and to answer lingering questions (dna13, 2010). If people begin following the organization during the crisis, the microblog can post updates that will reach interested stakeholders. Moreover, microblogs have the capacity to answer question if the answer is, in the case of Twitter, 140 characters or less. Regular corporate blogs and social network pages provide opportunities for posting updates and responding to questions, too. Social media provides channels for reaching stakeholders who are still

looking to engage the organization about crisis issues in the postcrisis phase, a point covered in Chapter 9.

■ CONCLUSION

This chapter began by noting that the Internet is speeding, rather than revolutionizing, the evolution of crisis communication. I argue for evolution because the Internet, especially social media, is helping crisis managers execute existing communication-related tasks rather than creating the need for entirely new ones. But crisis managers would be engaging in malpractice if they did not integrate social media into their activities. For instance, social media places a greater demand on scanning while providing more tools for accomplishing the task. Social media is important enough to crisis communication to warrant a separate chapter to highlight its impact. As noted earlier, later chapters extend the ways that social media is insinuating itself into crisis communication throughout the entire crisis management process.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is it important to understand that online and social media are really multiple channels and not one communication channel?

2. Which do you find more appealing and why, the small-seed or big-seed approach?

3. What do you think makes word of mouth so powerful?

4. What are the dangers associated with using any social media?

5. What, if any, value is there in differentiating between crises and paracrises?

6. Besides the cases listed in this chapter, what other evidence can you find that social media is affecting crisis communication?

7. Which social media do you use? Do you think organizations could use it to reach you during a crisis? Why or why not?