**Using Social Media in Crisis Communication:**

**A Research Article Analysis**

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**Introduction**

Have you ever heard someone make the claim that social media is useless? Whether you believe this claim to be true or not, the undeniable fact remains that social media is a crucial component of today’s functioning society. Social media began as a simple idea to link people together on an electronic medium so that they could communicate from any distance. Once its popularity grew and websites like Facebook and Twitter became household terms, social media’s true potential for corporate utilization became clear. Within this research paper we will analyze numerous academic articles discussing the effectiveness of the use of social media by companies, and why social media is an essential component for any organization to be successful.

**Integration of Social Media into Everyday Life**

Not only is social media an important aspect of entertainment in todays culture, but many argue that it has become an integrated part of human communication as well. This is not only seen through means of sharing content, but also for the co-creation of information (Brynielsson, J., et. al, 2018, p. 28). In the research article “Informing Crisis Alerts Using Social Media: Best Practices and Proof of Concept”, researchers try to identify key factors that are essential for the conception of a screening tool used to assess social media and its effectiveness as a medium for crisis communication.

This communication journal follows the evolution of media and how it has changed from a print medium to being almost entirely online. The section of the journal, written by Joel Brynielsson, Magdalena Granasen et al. talks about the integration of social media into human communication. This development of social media has been useful in establishing and maintaining social relationships, as well as sharing and co-creating information. Specifically, the article dives into how social media can be used as a beneficial tool for communicating crisis information. Social media has given those in the communication field who deal with crisis management a much faster way of communicating important crisis information, as well as a much wider audience to send these messages to.

Data was collected from two separate methods: an interview study investigating practitioner experience, and a systematic literature review. Their hope was to find that social media was an effective way of producing connectivity, or the extent to which a region or country is connected between people, and how fast the population can receive emergency warnings and other important information (Brynielsson, J., et. al, 2018, p. 33). Their findings were that emergency managers (crisis communication experts) can influence how people react and behave during emergencies by the way they tailor their social media messages.

**Incentives of Social Media**

Although there are many companies that try social media on the prospect of it being something new and fresh, other organizations need more convincing before integrating social media to be used more regularly. In the research article “Expert Views on Current and Future Use of Social Media Among Crisis and Emergency Management Organizations: Incentives and Barriers”, researchers Matti Haataja, Anne Laajalahti, and Jenni Hyvarinen explore the incentives and barriers that organizations face when deciding if they want to use social media on a regular basis.

This communication journal talks about current and future use of social media in crisis communication situations.  This portion of the journal reveals that most companies primarily use social media as a tool to quickly disseminate information. However, companies are increasingly using social media to also receive information *back* from citizens. This establishes that social media is intended to be used as a two-way communication platform. However, this article points out that until recent years companies have not fully utilized social media’s two-way communication potential. It lists the main barriers of companies utilizing social media as lack of knowledge, time, role models for implementation, as well as inflexible and old-fashioned organizational culture.

The research was conducted with a qualitative approach through an online questionnaire. Some questions were multiple choice, but the majority were open-ended style questions. The findings were that crisis and emergency management organizations use social media for many crisis-related purposes. They found that of the respondents, only 17% answered that their organizations are *not* using social media in any way for crisis-related purposes, while the rest (83%) reported that they used it for at *least* one purpose. This article ultimately makes the finding that social media is an effective tool for handling crisis situations.

**Impact of Crisis Origin**

While forming a message intended to be delivered within a crisis situation, an organization must anticipate the response the public will give in response to it. You must pay close attention to not only the content of the message, but how it is said as well. In the research article “Examining the Role of Social Media in Effective Crisis Management: The Effects of Crisis Origin, Information Form, and Source on Publics’ Crisis Responses” by Yan Jin, Brooke Fisher Liu, and Lucinda L. Austin, research is done to understand reactions to crisis information. The components of crisis information form, crisis information source, and crisis origin are tested. This is then used to discuss the publics preferred form of receiving information of this nature.

This article identifies the public's increased use of social media. The article claims that there is not much theory-grounded research to understand the key points of how publics consume crisis information via social media (Jin, Liu, Austin, 2011, p. 74). However, it references a theory that can fill this gap called the social-mediated crisis communication model (SMCC). The theory of SMCC was initially created as the BMCC, with the ‘B’ standing for ‘Blog’. Since online influencers are no longer *just* bloggers and are instead found to be on a variety of social media websites, they made a revision to the name (Jin, Liu, Austin, 2011, p. 77). Through research conducted through surveys given to college students, researchers assessed student’s perceptions of their university while they handed a crisis situation.

The findings show how the public anticipates how an organization should respond in a crisis situation, as well as the emotions that the public will feel when exposed to new crisis information. They found that perceptions of crisis origin can interact with both crisis information form and source (Jin, Liu, Austin, 2011, p. 86). Of various methods used to inform of a crisis situation, this research article found that social media was the most effective.

**The Risks of Using Social Media for Crisis Communication**

While there are many ways a social media campaign can be successful, there are also negative effects that can be seen if you are negligent. The research article “Reputations at Risk: Engagement During Social Media Crises” by Larissa Ott and Petra Theunissen focuses on the *risks* that companies face when using social media as a tool for crisis communication. The article claims that potential risks to corporate reputation are often glossed over by organizations. This can lead to inappropriate strategies surfacing, which can ultimately create or fuel social media crises (Ott, Theunissen, 2014, p. 97). The article follows three different organizations and their use of social media during crisis situations who all used different strategies and discusses their effectiveness.

They chose a method of research that used a multiple case study approach to collect the data given in their analysis. The article ultimately finds that authenticity and transparency were the best characteristics to have when communicating crisis messages (Ott, Theunissen, 2014, p. 101). It was also found that anger spreads fast on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which means that crisis responses must be carefully created to deliver a positive result.

**Using Exemplification in Your Messages**

There are various different methods that can make a social media message successful. One of these methods is called exemplification. According to the research article “Social Media and Corporate Reputation During Crises: The Viability of Video-Sharing Websites for Providing Counter-Messages to Traditional Broadcast News” by Patric R. Spence et. al., exemplification can be described as the use of highly emotional and arousing messages to elicit responses based on impression formation (Spence, Sellnow-Richmond et. al., 2015, p. 199). Their goal was to prove that exemplification can be shown to influence perceptions of organizations. This article discusses the use of exemplification in social media messages.

The research is done through analyzing news coverage of lean finely textured beef (LFTB). The article discusses the importance of highly emotional and arousing messages, specifically on video-sharing sites. After analyzing the effectiveness of these messages, public perceptions of organizational trust and reputation of the organization is discussed. They concluded that exemplification theory is useful, as the publics perception of how seriously the company is taking the crisis should be positive (Spence, Sellnow-Richmond et. al., 2015, p. 212). They also found that social media communication in this context should be open and conducted as regularly as possible.

**Strategic Impression Management**

The research paper “Crisis Communication and Social Media. A Systems- and Meidum- Theoretical Perspective” is from a journal and is written by Jesper Taekke. It discusses the recent rise in relevance of the field of crisis communication due to the social media revolution. The paper uses a systems theoretical approach to crisis communication specifically *for* social media. It describes the importance of strategic impression management when dealing with crisis communication on social media platforms. Mainly, the goal of your message should be to establish trust with the receiver.

The research was done exclusively based on the findings of Niklas Luhmann, a German sociologist. These works are also compared to the works of William Benoit, who’s five major crisis communication techniques are also applied. These techniques include denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, corrective action, and mortification (Taekke, 2017, p. 182-183). The conclusions of this paper found that in contemporary society, social media provide a possibility for organizations to sense changes in our surrounding world. (Taekke, 2017, 191). This is useful for organizations in determining how the public is reacting to new information. This information can be gathered instantly, as social media messages are made visible to the public immediately after posting. Ultimately, social media is once again shown to be an effective channel for crisis communication.

**The Importance of Source Credibility when Developing Crisis Responses**

It is important to remember that by using social media as a communication channel, you are implicitly inviting a response from the receiver. This is why it is crucial to make sure that the content of your message is accurate and truthful. In the research article “The Importance of Source and Credibility Perception in Times of Crisis: Crisis Communication in a Socially Mediated Era” by Ward Van Zoonen and Toni Van Der Meer, this is examined in depth. The article discusses the invaluable nature of social media during organizational crises and the role of the source of information during the current digital age.

The goal was to focus on the development of a positive reputation for an organization. According to Van Zoonen and Van Der Meer, a reputation is defined as the evaluation of organization’s ability to meet stakeholder expectations based on its performance (Van Zoonen, Van Der Meer, 2015, p. 372- 373). The findings show that judgment of organizational reputation by the public is largely based on how the organization executes crisis-response strategies. It is also important that the perceptions of source and content credibility are positive.

The data was collected from students at the University of Amsterdam who assessed the effectiveness of various crisis management cases. The conclusions highlighted that the most successful crisis campaigns strategically matched the crisis-response strategy and the sources of information used in the campaign. By establishing accurate sources, companies can use social media as an effective channel to handle a crisis communication situation.

**Hesitation to Switch to Social Media**

Many companies have been established and functioning well before the internet was even invented. In many of these companies, we may see more hesitation about switching over to using social media as a primary platform for communication. This is why in the research article “A Work-In Process Literature Review: Incorporating Social Media in Risk and Crisis Communication”, authors Shari R. Veil, Tara Beuhner, and Michael J. Palenchar attempt to establish exactly why moving to social media is the right move. This is a tough task to accomplish, as many companies are set in their old ways and do not like major change to their day to day operations.

The research is done through literature review, and mainly discusses how technological advances are transforming crisis management professional’s delivery of information. One of the primary advantages to making this change is the availability of direct access between consumers and organizations (Beuhner, Palenchar, Veil, 2011, 118). Many of the concerns for switching over this platform stem from concerns of technological failure. These concerns are not as relevant today as in 2011, as the advancement of cyber security has allowed for more comfort from these worries. It is also found that the internet is already the main source of details of a crisis, so communicating on the internet is determined to be a more effective course of action (Beuhner, Palenchar, Veil, 2011, 118).

**Conclusion**

In summation, we have analyzed various research done to determine the effectiveness of social media when used in a crisis communication context. The main advantages of adopting this strategy can be seen in various ways. By using social media, your company can effectively open up a two-way communication channel and address any of the publics concerns. These messages can also be delivered instantaneously, which can be extremely beneficial when your company needs to get information out to the public as quickly as possible. Overall, social media has proven to be a very effective tool for handing crises.

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