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Public information officers' social media monitoring during the Zika virus crisis, a global health threat surrounded by public uncertainty

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ABSTRACT

As Zika virus emerged as a global health concern in 2016, it was surrounded in public uncertainty regarding its transmission and health consequences. Health communicators were tasked with managing their own uncertainties and with incomplete information on the virus. Given the misinformation, rumors, and even conspiracy theories surrounding Zika virus, monitoring public awareness and understanding of the mysterious illness on social media could offer critical insight to crisis management. A survey ($n = 226$) was conducted with public information officers (PIOs) at local public health departments across the United States to reveal how they utilize and listen to social media during public health crises. In addition to an overall low rate of social media monitoring reported by PIOs, troublesome disparities exist based on community size served. However, there were positive relationships between social media monitoring and satisfaction with overall departmental crisis management as well as preparedness for Zika. These and many other monitoring trends are explored.

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1. Introduction

In Summer 2016, the World Health Organization declared Zika virus an international health emergency as increasing cases of microcephaly, a severe birth defect that may result from Zika virus during pregnancy, emerged. Zika was shrouded in uncertainty regarding its transmission and consequences; it surprised even the medical community with microcephaly and its sexual transmission (Martins, Dye, & Bavari, 2016). Questions abounded from confused publics. Was it safe to travel? What should pregnant women do? Where are the Zika-carrying mosquitos? Given the uncertainty surrounding Zika, conspiracy theories and pseudo-scientific claims about it developed quickly (Dredze, Broniatowski, & Hilyard, 2016). Unfortunately, social media only propagated some of the confusion with misinformation. In fact, one study of Facebook posts about Zika revealed that the most popular stories may also be the least accurate; Sharma, Yadav, Yadav, and Ferdinand (2016) found that conspiracy theories regarding Zika were more popular than public health education materials from health agencies and leading news sites.

Given the rapid spread of the disease and the graphic media associated with it, it is not surprising that Zika was a tremendously popular topic on social media (Sharma et al., 2016). As such, the efficient dissemination of accurate information promoting compliance to safeguarding directives from credible health sources was critical (Sharma et al., 2016). Dredze et al.

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(2016) note “public health officials must get out in front of the conspiracy theorists to educate and influence the population” on Zika, given that attitude change is more challenging than formation (p. 3442). For public health issues it is especially critical for communicators to understand online misinformation, but little is known about if and how they are monitoring public opinion and countering misinformation. To address that void, this study explores local health department public information officers’ (PIOs) social media monitoring and engagement of tools during the Zika crisis.

Zika mandated rapid and robust response from health communicators to minimize its transmission in publics (Cinnamon, Jones, & Adger, 2016). Given the abundance of Zika misinformation circulating on social media, examining PIOs’ efforts in disseminating accurate information as well as tracking their social media monitoring offers important insight to public health crisis management. To inform that understanding, a survey ($n = 226$) was conducted with PIOs at local public health departments across the United States in late Summer 2016, when the nature and extent of the threat of Zika were not fully realized. These “real-time” data illuminate the realities of PIOs managing a crisis full of uncertainty, when social media education and listening are of vital importance. Further, in the face of a complex emergency such as Zika, “poorly constructed campaigns can, at best, waste resources and at worst, undermine the disaster response effort” (Cinnamon et al., 2016; p. 263); public health PIOs do not have resources to waste, making research informing their efforts that much more important. Unlike retrospective crisis studies, this one captured social media engagement for crisis communication “in the moment” as PIOs at public health departments managed a mysterious and deadly wide-scale health threat.

2. Literature review

As social media transform public relations practice and are hailed for their ability to promote dialogic relationships (Allagui & Breslow, 2016; DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2012; Kent, Carr, Husted, & Pop, 2011), scholars must continue to pay close attention to how much practitioners are listening. There is a rapidly mounting body of research on how practitioners engage social media tools to “push”; less is known on what and how they are pulling from social media—especially in contexts other than corporate. The implications of listening to publics being issued protective measures during a health emergency via social media are higher than monitoring for reputation maintenance. A review of new media research in public relations journals from 1981 to 2014 found that, of the 321 crisis articles in the sample, across contexts there was a lack of continuity in and development of initial contributions (Duhé, 2015). This finding invites public relations scholars to consider where scholarship is in moving beyond initial descriptions of social media use. This study focuses on the role of listening, from the practitioner’s standpoint, and opens with a brief overview of social media public relations research.

2.1. Social media and public relations

For more than a decade, Wright and Hinson (2011) have surveyed practitioners to identify the impact of social and other new media on the field of public relations. The effect has no doubt been dramatic on not only practitioners but also publics; social media empower strategic publics and change the nature of the organization–public relationship (Wright & Hinson, 2011). Curtis et al. (2010) noted the increasing importance of social media tools especially for practitioners in the nonprofit sector and also that organizations with defined public relations departments were more likely to utilize them to reach their goals.

There are limited models to guide practitioners’ engagement of social media in the public relations literature; one exception is the social-mediated crisis communication model (SMCC) for the crisis context (Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011). SMCC extends the understanding of how publics use social media during crisis in order to achieve positive outcomes for organizations. A major proposition of SMCC is that people will engage social media amidst crisis for one of three reasons: issue relevance, information-seeking and sharing, and emotional support (Liu et al., 2011). SMCC also predicts the success of organizational crisis response based on the form and source of crisis communication.

Based on a case study of successful social media campaigns, Allagui and Breslow (2016) argue the resourcefulness of a social media campaign is not only measured by its provision of useful information to a target audience but also by the number of platforms on which information is used and shared. However, the social media mix and use of platforms should be careful and strategic; Schultz, Utz, and Goritz (2011) explored crisis social media use and its effects on crisis communication and found that the medium was even more important than the message itself. Wright and Hinson (2011), in a three-year examination of social media use among practitioners, found that practitioners identified Facebook as their most important channel for information dissemination. Similarly, Avery et al. (2010) explored the diffusion of social media among health PIOs and revealed social networking sites were their most commonly used tools.

To explore the current engagement of social media tools for crisis communication among PIOs at health departments across the United States and where those tools fit in their communication mixes, this research first asks: ‘RQ 1 Which communication channels are PIOs at health departments across the United States using to reach publics with crisis information?’

2.2. Social media monitoring during health crisis

Kent et al. (2011) argue web analytics should be considered strategic communication in order to realize fully the relationship building opportunity availed by online platforms. Hadi and Fleshler (2016) define social media monitoring during an emergency as “a process of ongoing, systematic searches of social media websites for up-to-the-minute information on

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