



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Public Relations Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pubrev

Social media dialogues in a crisis: A mixed-methods approach to identifying publics on social media

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Dialogue
Publics
Semantic network analysis
Crisis communication
Social media
Mixed methods

ABSTRACT

Despite the promise of social media to engender dialogue, the common approach to studying social media may prioritize monologue, whereby research considers the strategies organizations use in targeting publics, particularly in a crisis. This study uses a mixed-method approach to analyze dialogue in a crisis—semantic network analysis and content analysis. Specifically, this study examines the emotional expression and crisis coping behaviors on social media during two separate terror attacks: the Paris terror attacks in 2015 and the Barcelona terror attacks in 2017. Results demonstrate how publics may be identified and understood through semantic network analysis and content analysis. This study also shows the connection between emotions and coping, expanding the crisis communication literature in public relations, and suggests the need to consider agenda-setting and resilience in crisis communication research. Finally, we discuss this study's implications for assuming a dialogic orientation in public relations.

1. Introduction

In November 2015 and August 2017, a series of coordinated terrorist attacks were carried out in Paris, France and Barcelona, Spain, respectively. Following news of the attacks, social media outlets were flooded with news reports, support, and outrage about the attacks, providing yet another illustration of social media as a virtual space where individuals congregate to make sense of events and discuss issues.

Much of the research in public relations positions social media as vehicles for driving dialogue (Watkins, 2017). This effort is achieved through the capacity of social media to enable self-expression and “simulate the sense of being there in the mediated environment” (Oh & Sundar, 2016; p. 186). In fact, social media have been lauded for their capability to connect individuals and publics via the interactivity of the media (Waters & Williams, 2011), rendering dialogue the principle construct for examining the behaviors of publics and stakeholders. In the context of a crisis, these behaviors often include emotional expression and efforts to make sense of, and cope with, crisis events.

The current study uses social media as a lens into the crisis response of two separate terrorist attacks—one in Paris in 2015 and the other in Barcelona in 2017—to identify the dialogues that define publics. In particular, this study uses a mixed-method approach that includes a quantitative semantic network analysis and a qualitative content analysis to analyze emotional expression and crisis coping activities in response to the terror attacks. Semantic network analysis, an innovative and emerging tool for research, classifies dialogue based on co-occurrences of themes throughout the network of discussions on a topic. Results from this study not only demonstrate how publics engage in self-expression during a crisis, fulfilling the dialogic mandate to understand publics on their own

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2018.07.005>

Received 16 February 2018; Received in revised form 10 July 2018; Accepted 13 July 2018
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terms (Taylor & Kent, 2014), but they also suggest how publics might be identified through semantic network analysis. Furthermore, this study reveals new connections between emotions and crisis coping activities, and the need to place more emphasis on positive emotions and under-recognized crisis coping behaviors like agenda-setting and resilience in crisis communication research. Finally, this study suggests roles that social media publics fill in disseminating crisis information.

2. Literature review: the crisis experience in the digital age

The term ‘crisis’ is broadly considered a major and unexpected event that poses significant impact, including a “major toll” on human lives, property, and other economic and social factors of organizations and their publics (Coombs, 2012; Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Though the impact may be a “radical change for good as well as bad” (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013), the common denominator of crisis definitions is that a crisis requires a recognizable impact. In some instances, this impact may be perceptual. In fact, Fediuk, Coombs, and Botero (2012) argue that a crisis is “an event or *perception of an event* that threatens or violates important value expectancies” (p. 638, italics added), and Coombs (2012) uses the terms “perception of an unpredictable event” (p. 19) in his crisis definition.

Despite the centrality of perception and impact in defining a crisis, much of the literature has focused on crisis communication strategy, which has resulted in a predominance of rhetorical analyses evaluating communicator messages and strategies in crisis communication literature (per An & Cheng, 2012; and Kent, 2011), and a corresponding blind spot about the experience of publics in a crisis. This has particularly been the case in research on crisis communication in social media, where crises are evaluated by models to target influential publics in a crisis.

For example, Jin and Liu (2010) proposed the blog-mediated crisis communication model (BMCC), which explained information distribution regarding crises as initiated on, or intensified through, blogs. The BMCC focused on the motivations and effects of influential bloggers in communicating about an organizational crisis. The model’s purpose was to help crisis managers consider if and when to respond to bloggers regarding a crisis, ultimately proposing that organizations track and target influential bloggers in their crisis communication efforts online.

Shortly after its inception, the BMCC was renamed the social-mediated crisis communication model to capture a wider net of social media information distribution behaviors (Liu, Jin, Briones, & Kuch, 2012). The original proposition remained the same—effective crisis communication strategy on social media hinges on tapping influential social media users. Based on the trends that American adults’ preferred source of information is the Internet, and that this information is community-sourced and socially-distributed, the SMCC posits that crisis information is transmitted based on form (i.e. traditional media vs. social media) and source. The model identifies three types of social media-based publics—creators, followers, and inactives—and hypothesizes that information may be transmitted either directly (between creators and followers) or indirectly (between followers and inactives) (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012; Liu et al., 2012).

Despite the SMCC model’s basis on social media behavior, it heavily focuses on message distribution strategy, rather than publics’ meaning-making activities in a crisis or the relationship between publics (i.e. between creators and followers, creators and creators, or followers and followers). Though the SMCC model informs organizations on effective ways to distribute messages in a crisis, its key takeaway—that messages should be distributed through influencers—mirrors the traditional media imperative to distribute information via opinion leaders, and therefore offers limited unique understanding of social media behavior. Furthermore, the model focuses more on the distribution of content, than on the content itself, leaving little room for understanding publics’ perspectives and meaning-making experiences in a crisis. Finally, the SMCC model does little to understand the relationship between publics, and between publics and organizations.

Therefore, despite the value of models like the SMCC, more research is needed to understand crises from publics’ perspectives, including the behaviors and nuances of social media interaction and content sharing. The emerging focus on dialogues in public relations provides a valuable context from which to understand publics’ social-mediated behavior in a crisis because it puts the focus on empathy and recognition of individuals’ meanings and experience.

2.1. Dialogue in public relations

Dialogic communication is an emerging focus in public relations, though the concept was developed over two decades ago. Defined as “any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions” (Kent & Taylor, 1998), dialogic communication was originally developed as a framework for cultivating organization-public interaction on websites. Accordingly, Kent and Taylor (1998) proposed that dialogic communication comprised five principles sustaining online interaction: the usefulness of information presented, the ease of use of the website, feedback loops built into a website’s design, the conservation of visitor time on a website, and the generation of return visitors.

However, the concept of dialogic communication is deeper than a set of guidelines for managing online media; rather, it represents a set of values for “meaningful interaction” in a communicative orientation that include mutuality, propinquity (or the recognition of public input, and publics’ willingness to provide it), empathy, risk, and commitment (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 388). Dialogic communication is more than interaction or a set of guidelines for managing communication, but rather a communicative orientation that “mitigates power relationships” and treats dialogue as an ethical process of mutual understanding and recognizes the worth of communicative interactants (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Dialogic communication operates off of the principle that “people who do not know or trust someone else will not share personal information” (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 390). As such, the purpose of dialogue is to establish relationships with stakeholders through “meaning-making, understanding, and sympathetic/

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