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Examining multiplicity and dynamics of publics' crisis narratives with large-scale Twitter data

Xinyan Zhao^{a,*}, Mengqi Zhan^b, Cheng Jie^c

^a Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong

^b University of Texas at Arlington, United States

^c University of Maryland, United States

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ABSTRACT

The new reality of networked publics on social media calls for crisis communication practitioners and researchers to understand the narratives generated by publics on social media during organizational crises. As social media publics possess diverse, unique characteristics and communicative needs during a crisis, they form interpretative communities and co-create various symbolic interpretations of the crisis. Extending the public-centric and narrative perspective to the context of social media crises, we examined what crisis narratives were constructed by social media publics (i.e., multiplicity) and how these narratives changed by crisis stages (i.e., dynamics). Using topic modelling based on large-scale Twitter data of the Chipotle E. coli crisis ($N = 40,610$), we identified ten narratives subsumed under two themes (i.e., sharing-based and conversation-based) based on publics' social constructions of their perceived risks and crisis experience. On the one hand, sharing-based narratives, heavily impacted by publics' shared media coverage, reflected media crisis narratives and salient risk perceptions aligning with the news agenda. On the other hand, conversation-based narratives, fueled by publics' opinion expression and emotional venting, demonstrated publics' interpretations of their experience with the organization in the crisis with less salient but more diversified risk perceptions. Crisis managers are recommended to produce and deliver compelling narratives resonating with different groups of social media publics during crises.

The rise of networked publics on social media challenges the practice of crisis communication. Empowered by social media platforms such as Twitter, stakeholders interact with each other and form various online communities. During crises, different stakeholders disseminate updating information and share crisis narratives on social media (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). These narratives can challenge the organizational agenda and influence publics' attitudes toward the organization in crises (Lachlan, Spence, & Lin, 2017). As such, it becomes critical for crisis communication practitioners and researchers to examine the diverse and dynamic content created by social media publics (e.g., Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Saxton & Waters, 2014). Understanding how different publics make sense of a crisis at a particular stage on social media can help crisis managers develop informed strategic communication tailoring to different segments of stakeholders (Zhao, Zhan, & Wong, 2018).

Narratives represent the symbolic interpretations of events (1985, Fisher, 1984). With a narrative paradigm, crisis communication researchers have examined the competing organizational narratives during crises (Bowen & Heath, 2007; Heath, 2006; Seeger & Sellnow, 2016) and crisis narratives created by organizations and individual stakeholders on social media (Chewning, 2015;

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: zhaoxy@terpmail.umd.edu (X. Zhao).

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Sanderson, Barnes, Williamson, & Kian, 2016; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). This line of research can be extended by scrutinizing the diverse and dynamic narratives shared by publics on social media during crises. By understanding the unique characteristics and communicative needs of publics dispersed in heterogeneous communities on social media, crisis managers can engage with multiple ongoing conversations by satisfying different publics' distinct informational, emotional, and social needs during crises (Jin & Liu, 2010).

Our study contributes to the narrative and crisis communication literature in several ways. First, adopting a narrative and public-centric perspective, we extend the literature by examining the multiplicity of publics' narratives on social media during crisis. Social media publics possess diverse internal needs, values, and goals (Botan & Soto, 1998; Jin & Liu, 2010). Confronted with the divergence of publics' conversations on social media, crisis managers should approach the resolution of the crisis by intervening with the unique narratives shared by a specific segment of publics on social media. Second, crises as non-routine and high-risk events requires sensemaking (Coombs, 2007; Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). To further understand how publics make sense of the crisis through narrative constructions, we examined how two central elements of crisis narratives, publics' risk interpretations and organizational identifications, were weaved into diverse narratives (Palenchar & Lemon, 2018). Understanding the risk evaluations and organizational identifications of a specific group can help an organization to design and deliver tailoring content to a particular segment of publics. Last, with a dynamic perspective, we explored how publics' narratives shifted on social media based on the crisis stages. Publics' narratives are embedded in their secondary crisis communication (e.g., word-of-mouth), visible to other audiences and thus affects these publics' attitudes toward the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013). Only by understanding the trend of publics' shared narratives can the organization join the ongoing multiple conversations and help publics to cope with the crisis on time.

In sum, our study examines the diversity and dynamics of crisis narratives emerging from publics' communication on social media during a crisis. We collected large-scale Twitter data for the Chipotle crisis in six-month period ($N = 40,610$). With topic modeling, a machine learning algorithm for discovering hidden themes in large-scale data (Blei, Ng, & Jordan, 2003), we analyzed the diverse narratives shared by different interpretative communities in the crisis. Our results can generate meaningful insights for crisis managers, especially in helping them identify the distinct needs of publics and engaging in publics' rapidly changing conversations.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. A public-centric perspective to social media

Empowered by new media technology, publics' voices have been more influential (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). As such, many researchers consider it essential to adopt a public-centric perspective to crisis communication (Lee, 2004; Vasquez, 1994). Publics are those affected by a crisis. Publics share common interests in seeing the crisis resolved and have influence on the organization's reputation and operation (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2012). In the social media context, publics include not only message audiences, but also message producers, such as media agencies and other organizations (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012; Fraustino & Liu, 2017). Publics' voices merge, crash, and together form narratives that can challenge the organization's agenda (Chewning, 2015; Sanderson et al., 2016). A public-centric perspective advocates that organizations should develop crisis messages based on publics' voices and narratives (Fraustino & Liu, 2017; Seeger, 2006).

One limitation in this line of research is that publics' voices are considered as a uniform collection of voices coexisting with organizational voices. However, social media publics should not be treated as a homogenous population, because (1) they form different relationships with the organization before a crisis; (2) they develop unique crisis perceptions based on their distinct communicative needs in a crisis. Therefore, during a crisis, some publics may choose to be brand advocates and protect the organization in a crisis (e.g., Fuggetta, 2012). Some publics may be confused and uncertain about what they should do in the crisis (e.g., Jin & Liu, 2010). Others may distrust or even boycott the organization in crises (e.g., Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011). In addition, publics may choose to interact with their like-minded users on social media.

In an organizational crisis, there may be heterogeneous communities on social media in which a segment of publics shares certain understandings of a crisis. Examining the multiplicity of public's voices and narratives can help an organization to customize communication content and maximize communication effectiveness (Sturges, 1994). Below we explain how a narrative paradigm can be extended to the context of organizational crises on social media.

1.2. A narrative paradigm to social media crises

Based on the narrative paradigm, human beings are social storytellers (Fisher, 1984; Kaman, 2005; Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). Symbols are communicated as stories to help people to make sense of the experience (1985, Fisher, 1984). People in a community share co-created interpretations of events (Vasquez, 1993; Zhao, Falkheimer, & Heide, 2017). Narratives consist of a variety of elements, including frames, themes, analogies, characteristics, and so on (Heath, 1994; Kent, 2015).

According to the symbolic convergence theory (SCT; Bormann, 1985), publics create social realities by sharing fantasies, which are imaginative shared interpretations of events that fulfill a group's psychological or rhetorical needs (Vasquez, 1993). Publics as a rhetorical community chain the interpretations to build group consciousness and achieve symbolic convergence about their common experience. Further, Vasquez's (1993, 1994) homo narrans theory adopts a communication-centered view of public relations by considering public relations as the exchange of messages in the form of stories between an organization and its publics. Based on the two theories, Botan and Soto (1998) proposed a semiotic approach to explain how and why people come to share narratives. Different

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