Public Relations Review 42 (2016) 38–48

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Public Relations Review

The double-edged crisis: Invisible Children's social media response to the Kony 2012 campaign

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 15 March 2015
Received in revised form 7 July 2015
Accepted 1 October 2015
Available online 29 October 2015

Keywords:
Crisis communication
Invisible Children
Organizational learning
Social media

ABSTRACT

Using the ideas of social media activism and organizational learning to guide analysis, this paper explores Invisible Children, Inc.'s social-mediated response to the humanitarian crisis in Central and East Africa, the organizational crisis these responses created, and how the organization responded to these different types of crisis via social media. Key findings include describing their humanitarian crisis response as a "social experiment," Invisible Children's personalization of response on social media to their organizational crisis, and the increased transparency Invisible Children demonstrated during and after the crisis. The results of this study demonstrate how social media have the ability to play a key role in increasing awareness about an important humanitarian cause, yet can also threaten the reputation and legitimacy of the organization behind the social-mediated message.

1. Introduction

Crises manifest themselves in multiple ways—from organizational crises to large-scale humanitarian crises. In public relations, understanding and studying crises have largely been limited to crises that occur to organizations—particularly corporations (Coombs, 1999; Heath & O'Hair, 2010). However, nonprofit organizations also need to prepare for the potential for crises that can negatively impact their reputations (Sisco, Collins, & Zoch, 2010; Schwarz & Pforr, 2011), particularly as new and social media allow activists to reach intended and unintended audiences across the globe (Seo, Kim, & Yang, 2009). But how do social media influence the intersection of humanitarian and nonprofit organizational crises? For Invisible Children, Inc. (IC), a nonprofit organization focused on stopping the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Eastern and Central Africa, the intersection of multiple crises began on March 5, 2012. On that day it released a 30-min documentary on YouTube called "Kony 2012" to raise awareness about the humanitarian crises perpetuated by Uganda's LRA leader Joseph Kony. IC's initial goal was to receive 500,000 views within two months of releasing the video (Chalk, 2012). However, in just six days, the video received more than 100 million views, becoming the most viral video in history at that time (Wasserman, 2012). The initial positive reception of the video quickly turned negative on social media channels, including questioning the legitimacy of the organization, the efficacy of its methods, and the motivations of the filmmakers (Briones, Madden, & Janoske, 2013). In addition to credibility attacks leveled against the organization, the attacks quickly became personal

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.10.002

for one of the three founders of IC, Jason Russell, whose very public meltdown shortly after the release of Kony 2012 was captured on social media.

This study explores social media as a double-edged sword in IC's crisis response. Although the organization found that social media helped raise awareness of humanitarian crises, it also created an organizational crisis through negative comments and discussions online that prompted questions about their leadership, motivations, and financial structure. Using the ideas of social media activism and organizational learning to guide analysis, this paper explores IC's social-mediated response to the humanitarian crisis in Central and East Africa, the organizational crisis these responses created, and the organization's response to these different types of crises via social media.

2. Literature review

2.1. Defining and communicating organizational crises

No organization is immune to crises, which can arise from either inside or outside an organization (Coombs, 1999). Historically, crisis communication research has often focused on organizations, including their reputation, response, and the ability to continue on after the crisis (Heath & O'Hair, 2010). From this perspective, a crisis is a specific incident with a short time frame, and is spontaneous and reactive (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2011).

Organizational crises are often a unique moment for an organization that entail three common characteristics: surprise (the impact is beyond initial comprehension), threat (different from the typical problems faced), and short response time (necessary to retain control) (Hermann, 1963). Because individuals or organizations may have different understandings of those three characteristics, a crisis is perceptual; if someone believes the event to be a crisis, then it is one (Coombs, 2012). Due to these differences in perception and the speed at which they can occur, crises often produce high levels of uncertainty (Ulmer et al., 2011). Most crises are unpredictable but not entirely unexpected events, and organizations should work to prepare themselves for the potential types of crises they may face (Coombs, 2012), such as natural disasters, workplace violence, product recalls, or other catastrophic events.

Organizations build their reputations with publics through both direct and indirect experiences (Brown & Roed, 2001). One challenge that nonprofit organizations in particular face is that "Americans hold an overly romanticized ideal image" of them (Carson, 2002; p.252), which can harm their ability to receive support from the public. There is often a misperception surrounding nonprofit organizations in terms of how funds are spent (Sisco, 2012). For example, after the September 11 attacks, the American Red Cross received public outcry because some donations were used for overhead costs and future preparedness endeavors rather than going directly to support victim's families (Sisco, 2012). As Sisco (2012) explained, "[i]n a crisis, if [nonprofit organizations] disappoint the public, resulting in a loss of public confidence, they risk not just their reputations, but possibly their very existence" (p.4). Because of the faith put in nonprofit organizations to operate ethically and honestly, building and maintaining trust with publics is especially important for their reputations (Sisco, 2012).

2.2. Defining and communicating humanitarian crises

Humanitarian crises are either singular events or a series of events that pose a health or safety threat to a community or group of people (Humanitarian Coalition, n.d.). Within public relations research, humanitarian crisis efforts are most commonly discussed in relationship to natural disasters (e.g., Chen, 2009; Jeong, 2010), manmade disasters (e.g., Littlefield, Reierson, Cowden, Stowman, & Feather, 2009), or complex geopolitical events (e.g., Hwang & Cameron, 2008; Storie, Madden, & Liu, 2014).

Both traditional and social media play a role in publicizing human suffering and facilitating "global compassion" by exposing pictures and stories of distant victims of civil wars, genocides, and other types of violence against civilian populations (Höijer, 2003; p.19). While humanitarian organizations use media to garner support for their causes and raise awareness of issues, there is a tension between increased visibility and the public's skepticism toward a mediated morality—also called "compassion fatigue" (Vestergaard, 2008; p.471). In many cases, the crises that humanitarian organizations communicate about are geographically far removed from the target audiences of their messages. Media increasingly play a role in defining relationships with a global "other" (Kogen, 2009; p.63). A common narrative in humanitarian crisis discourse targeted toward Western audiences is that of the "heroic savior," with the presumption that the international community is largely absent from the humanitarian violence until that community arrives to save the day (Benedicto, 2005; p.105). Although a gross oversimplification and glossing over of such crises, this narrative serves as a powerful device for many activist campaigns that mobilize international audiences and decision-makers (Benedicto, 2005).

New technologies are revolutionizing the shape and substance of humanitarian activist campaigns as a form of crisis response, although many traditional elements of activist campaigns are still utilized, and sometimes enhanced, through new technologies. For example, Amnesty International (AI) has adopted new technologies in developing human rights campaigns. Many AI supporters continue to handwrite and mail appeals as part of campaigns, although the organization has adopted e-mail appeals, text messaging, and social media as crucial parts of its advocacy campaigns (Lebert, 2003). In a case study of ONE, a campaign against extreme poverty and AIDS, Tatarchevskiy (2011) argued that while organizations use Web 2.0 in campaigns to make activism convenient and standardized, the audience participates in visual labor that creates