



The role of social media in local government crisis communications



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ABSTRACT

Using survey data collected from more than 300 local government officials from municipalities across the United States, this study examines social media use in a relatively unexplored context, local governments. It specifically addresses the adoption and use of social media tools for crisis communication and social media's part in managing a crisis. Results indicate the extent of social media use, but not the number of tools used, is positively associated with local city officials' assessments of their ability to control a crisis situation as well as their overall evaluations of the strength of their responses. Implications and importance of findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Social media enable local governments to communicate important government information, extend government services, and garner feedback and ideas about government operations with citizens (Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010). The open, dialogic nature of social media eliminates many of the barriers in citizen communication that governments have historically experienced (Bertot & Jarger, 2010), and communication with constituents can be more frequent, open, and targeted. These benefits offer particular potential and opportunities for governments to communicate with citizens during times of crises.

The City of Boston utilized social media heavily to communicate with the public in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon Bombings in early 2013. Social media usage by governments was also vital during the recent wildfires in Yosemite National Park as well as the historic flooding in Colorado to get information about the crises and safety protocols to citizens and other interested parties. In times of crisis, social media allow governments and other organizations to communicate quickly and effectively to reach mass publics (Kim & Liu, 2012).

A 2013 Pew Research Center report revealed that 72% of American adults utilize social networking sites, which represents a 6% increase from the previous year (Pew Research, 2013). This number is growing exponentially and daily, and organizations are likewise increasingly taking advantage of this trend to communicate with their publics. These overall numbers of social networking usage and a 2013 survey on the state of the news media that identifies a decline in traditional news outlets (Pew Research, 2013) together suggest that citizens will increasingly go online for organizational information, including that from their governments.

Social media are an important technology for disaster response, primarily because of the tools that enable open exchange of information through conversation and interaction (Yates & Paquette, 2011). Given its communicative abilities and

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contemporary pervasiveness, social media are no longer an optional channel for governments to use only to push organizational messages. As user-generated media, social media give government public relations practitioners the ability to inform and to seek input and opinions from relevant publics (Hand & Ching, 2011) in real-time, which is especially important during a crisis.

Despite the enormous value social media yield governments in communicating with citizens, there is scant research on the extent to which local governments are actually using social media for crisis communication efforts. As local governments continue to face diminishing budgets and stretched time, and less human and fiscal resources even for the management of daily operations, it is imperative to reveal how social media can maximize efficiency in crisis management. Given the extraordinary growth in social media use over the past few years, it is also important to evaluate if and how governments are using this technology to communicate with publics during crises and if and how they are incorporating it into their crisis communication plans. This exploratory research provides an important audit of local governments' use of social media during crisis to inform future research on how social media can best be utilized across government contexts. An exploration of the nature of current social media practices of local governments for crisis communication focuses the discussion on how current practice can be improved. Specific research questions explore the adoption and use of social media tools for crisis communication by local governments and the role social media play in managing a crisis.

2. Literature review

First, the role of social media in local governments is reviewed. Then, the benefits of citizen engagement are explicated to demonstrate the potential of social media in crisis management.

2.1. Social media and government

As the popularity of social media soars, the importance that governments place on social media as a communication tool to engage citizens must rise in turn and reflect active dialog with citizens as a priority (Golbeck et al., 2010). Previous research reveals governments are adopting social media for many different purposes, including: recruiting activities (Dorris, 2008); reaching out to citizens and other publics; disseminating information to the public and sharing information across government agencies (Chang & Kanan, 2008; Dorris, 2008); enhancing and promoting community participation (Dorris, 2008); and achieving transparency (Bertot & Jarger, 2010; Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010). Although Duhe (2014) notes government and politics is a surging area of new media research, only one study (Graham & Avery, 2013) has focused on local governments. While the reported benefits of social media use for governments are vast, a recent national study by Graham and Avery (2013) reveals local governments are somewhat underutilizing social media tools. Encouragingly, the majority of local governments report using social media to some extent; however, the extent that each tool is used does not represent active engagement with citizens through social media (Graham & Avery, 2013). Since governments are an important information source for publics during a crisis, their engagement through social media should be more active and reflect a clear response priority in crisis communication plans.

2.2. Benefits of citizen engagement

Efficiency, convenience, accountability, transparency, citizen involvement, and improved trust and democracy are among the cited benefits of social media use in government (Chang & Kanan, 2008; Cromer, 2010; Dorris, 2008; Kuzma, 2010). Through social media applications, governments can communicate more efficiently with publics than with more traditional media and are often able to save resources including time and money (Kingsley, 2010; Kuzma, 2010). Most federal government agencies have a social media presence that includes blogs, social networking sites, YouTube channels, and more (Bertot, Jaeger, Munson, & Glaisyer, 2010). Moreover, citizens actively using social media desire tangible and interactive communication with their governments (Lovari & Parisi, 2015).

While the majority of research regarding social media and governments focuses on the federal level, one exception is Hand and Ching's (2011) examination of Phoenix area local governments' use of social media that found "using social media at the local government level seems to offer promise of increased citizen engagement, reaching citizens on a common platform, and allowing for citizen comments" (p. 379). A similar study by Bonson, Torres, Royo, and Flores (2012) that examined social media use in local governments in Europe found that many governments have taken advantage of the opportunities social media present and realized that by disseminating news through social media they can vastly increase audience reach at little cost. Moreover, the main benefits that social media offer the public sector are increased opportunities for engagement with citizens and enhanced transparency (Bonson et al., 2012). Since citizen expectations are a primary consideration for local government activities, government officials' understandings of citizen expectations of their social media use is a strong indicator of its usage and importance in government (Avery & Graham, 2013). Still, there is no current assessment of how local governments are using social media for crisis communication; therefore, we ask:

RQ1. To what extent do local governments engage social media during crisis?

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