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Communication in the face of a school crisis: Examining the volume and content of social media mentions during active shooter incidents



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ABSTRACT

Little is known about the effectiveness of social media in delivering information during active shooter incidents at the P-12 level. This study analyzed social media activity that occurred during and after two active shooter events on September 30, 2014. Over 5000 social media posts from Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and mainstream news outlets were analyzed. Social media analysis outlined the scope of online communication during the first week following the incidents, revealed social media frequency, increases in conversation, misinformation, and differences between parent and student posts. Results revealed spikes in social media chatter following the release of the identities of shooters and victims. Consistent with media dependency theory and the high levels of uncertainty characteristic of the incident, users' social media posts contained more information than affect displays during the active shooter event. Implications for scholars and P-12 administrators are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Since 1992, nearly 400 active shooter incidents have occurred in U.S. schools (stopheshootings.org, n.d.). The Department of Education guide uses FBI guidelines for defining an active shooter situation, focusing specifically on incidents in which “an individual is ‘actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area’” (Duncan, Delisle, & Esquith, 2013, p. 56). According to a recent FBI report, the U.S. has experienced a rise in the average number of active shooter incidents, rising from 6.4 to 16.4 per year across contexts (e.g., education, government, and commerce) in less than 10 years (Thomas, Cloherty, & Levine, 2014). The FBI documented 27 active shooter events from 2000–2013 in P-12 schools (Blair & Schweit, 2014); however, other accounts suggest much higher numbers and identify 94 school shootings (49 at the P-12 level) since the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School (Newtown, CT) when factoring in “fatal and nonfatal assaults, suicides, and unintentional shootings” (everytown.org, 2014). While the numbers vary depending on the parameters designated for a school shooting, what is clear is

that active shooter events are a major concern in the nation's schools. Unfortunately, schools remain underprepared for the communication challenges school crises present (Ashby, 2007; Barker & Yoder, 2012; Carr, 2009). Furthermore, a lack of research on school crisis communication can leave schools underprepared for school crises and their lasting impact on students, parents, and the larger community.

The communication elements associated with active shooter events have profound implications for school districts (Regan, 2013). Seeger, Heyart, Barton, and Bultnyck (2001) argued that communication is the “most important [element] in crisis management” (p. 381). Although researchers have identified school shootings as communication events (Sumiala & Tikka, 2010), scholars have conducted minimal research on crisis communication in schools. A larger body of research on communication during crises exists (Hale, Dulek, & Hale, 2005; Heath, 2006; Seeger, 2006; Seeger et al., 2001), but crisis scholars acknowledge educational institutions are unique due to the characteristics of students and parents and the role schools play in the community (Barker & Yoder, 2012). Further, communication elements typically receive little attention in school crisis emergency plans (Barker & Yoder, 2012). More specifically, research clearly indicates that the management of social media receives almost no attention in school

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crisis plans (Thompson, in preparation). Even at the federal level, social media is not addressed in the communication annex section of the Department of Education's Guide for Developing High Quality Emergency Operations Plans (Duncan et al., 2013). Social media have brought about a new set of communication issues that schools need to consider during and after school crises. As Lachlan, Spence, Lin, Najarian, et al. (2014) stated, "As publics increasingly rely on social media" during crises, it is imperative for "organizations to understand how to effectively incorporate these new technologies into crisis management" (p. 520). Social media places significant pressure on schools and other organizations to release information to stakeholders quickly, and often, inaccurately (Carr, 2009; Ki & Nekmat, 2014). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to analyze P-12 active school shooter events to better understand the communication that occurs via social media and assist schools with their preparation for the challenges brought about by new technologies.

2. Theoretical background

Media dependency theory predicts that individuals rely on mediated information to meet their needs, but individuals have specific preferences related to where they will turn for information concerning a particular topic (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). These patterns can also be shaped by situational factors such as informational needs that often vary across situations (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989). During an active school shooter event, parents, students, and the larger community have an immediate need for updated information as the crisis develops and often turn to news media and social media outlets (Lee & Ma, 2012). Although initial information might come from a host of sources, individuals typically monitor the sources they most frequently depend on for information as the crisis progresses (Lachlan, Spence, Lin, & Del Greco, 2014). In addition to informational characteristics, social media posts during crises also feature an affect dimension as users share their emotions (e.g., fear, anger, etc.) related to the event (Lachlan, Spence, Lin, & Del Greco, 2014).

Media dependency theory is particularly relevant to communication that occurs during active school shooter incidents. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) argued that dependency processes become increasingly prevalent in scenarios where audiences are particularly invested in the information or in situations characterized by conflict and uncertainty. Extant research has revealed increases in media dependency during crisis situations (e.g., Hindman & Coyle, 1999; Lachlan, Spence, & Nelson, 2010; Lachlan, Spence, & Seeger, 2009; Loges, 1994; Lowrey, 2004; Lyu, 2012; Tai & Sun, 2007). Given the tenets of media dependency theory, it stands to reason that most individuals will secure information from mediated sources during a crisis, but lean on preferred sources for additional information. Recent statistics suggest most American adults prefer the Internet as a source of information (Gallup, 2013), while other data suggest that Americans spend much of their online time (22.5%) using social media (Nielsen, 2011). For parents, emergency responders, media, and the general public, social media can quickly become the prominent information source during an active school shooter incident.

3. Active shooter incidents and social media

Social media use during and after crises poses a significant concern for P-12 schools. Kenneth Trump (2009), President of National School Safety and Security Services, summarized:

Today's tech savvy students and parents, for better or worse, have a distinct advantage in getting their messages out faster than do school officials. While school leaders typically need

time to investigate rumors and verify information, many students and parents will forward to each other information they mistakenly believe to be true.

[p. 31]

Thus, in many cases, parents and students are among the most frequent posters of social media content during school shootings. These posts may be inaccurate and contribute to emotional trauma post-crisis which can have a detrimental effect on student learning (Suomalainen, Haravuori, Berg, Kivuruusu, & Marttunen, 2011). Further, student messages posted on social media often generate false information that mainstream media often report in their newscasts and on their websites (Papandrea, 2012). Alarming, in some instances, information and pictures posted result in families of victims learning of their child's status through social media (Barker & Yoder, 2012; Papandrea, 2012). Researchers have emphasized miscommunication and poor management of media and social media during and after school shootings, dating back to the school shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado and continuing through Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut (Barker & Yoder, 2012; Carr, 2009).

The potential for social media to elevate the trauma experienced by students and their parents can have an adverse impact on student learning (Suomalainen et al., 2011) and affect the learning environment through negative emotional experiences (Mazer, McKenna-Buchanan, Quinlan, & Titsworth, 2014). Sadly, the traumatic effect on families as well as the district's student population can negatively affect students' capacity to learn in the aftermath of an active shooter event. For example, Littleton, Axsom, and Grills-Taquechel (2011) examined the extent to which losing or gaining interpersonal (e.g., companionship, loyalty of friends) and intrapersonal resources (e.g., hope, intimacy) predicted adjustment after shooting events. Individuals who experienced resource losses reported greater psychological distress six months following the shooting. Further, participants who experienced less social support before the shooting event were more likely to report losing these important resources. Combined, these findings point toward significant learning challenges for students who return to school following a shooting.

Little research to date has analyzed the scope of communication via social media that occurs during and following a school crisis. In fact, Lachlan, Spence, Lin, Najarian, et al. (2014) indicated, "Although such research is becoming more common, scientific studies about the nature of social media content that is used on the management of these events or its availability is absent within the literature" (p. 520). Sumiala and Tikka (2010) also pointed out that the minimal research conducted on social media use in the school shooting context focuses on social media use of the shooter rather than how others (e.g., students, parents, general users, etc.) use social media.

Scholars have explored social media use in the educational context. Thompson and Mazer (2009) found that college student Facebook use made students' supportive communication more accessible and helped students assist each other with academic issues. Unfortunately, student social media use in the school crisis context might have the opposite effect. Thompson (in preparation) reported that school crisis teams indicated that social media was one of the most significant communication challenges they face, and one of the areas they were least prepared to manage. Further examination of the volume and frequency of messages disseminated via social media is warranted to improve communication during and after school crises. Therefore, we posed the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the volume of social media messages during an active school shooter incident?

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