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Stealing thunder and filling the silence: Twitter as a primary channel of police crisis communication

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ABSTRACT

Twitter can be used successfully by police departments as a channel for stealing thunder and establishing the department as a credible news source. A case study analysis of how a police department used Twitter during a mall shooting was conducted. Results reveal the potential benefits and limitations of using Twitter to steal thunder and a new technique, filling the silence, is proposed for maintaining an audience once an organization has stolen thunder.

1. Introduction

Twitter holds potential as a primary crisis communication channel during an imminent threat because of its instant and accessible nature (Choi, 2012; Stephens, Barrett, & Mahometa, 2013; van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2013). The Boston Marathon Bombings in 2013 demonstrate this potential key role that social media, particularly Twitter, may have during imminent threat crises (Davis, Alves, & Sklansky, 2014). A mass notification system can save time and lives (Coombs, 2015a) and Twitter potentially provides such a system. Early notification may also provide certain benefits for an organization if it is the first to break the news (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskow-Ewoldsen, 2005; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012; Lee, 2016). Stealing thunder is a proactive crisis communication tactic that involves an organization breaking its own newsworthy information first (Arpan & Roskow-Ewoldsen, 2005; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012; Coombs, 2015b; Lee, 2016).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how and why Twitter was used successfully as a primary communication channel to steal thunder during an imminent threat crisis. The Columbia Mall Shooting is an ideal case to examine because police used Twitter to steal thunder and received positive feedback from local media and at-risk publics. Little research has examined if police departments could experience the same benefits that other organizations do by stealing thunder during crises; yet proactive crisis communication continues to be a growing trend among police departments (Guarino, 2015). Additionally, most research on stealing thunder has focused on traditional media or face-to-face disclosure (e.g. Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Krylova, Longacre, & Phillips, 2016; Lee, 2016; Wigley, 2011).

This study takes a naturalistic approach to theory development, adding an in-depth qualitative piece to the recent quantitative and experimental research on crisis communication theories and social media (e.g., Liu, Fraustino, & Jin, 2015; Liu, Fraustino, & Jin, 2016; van Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015). In this case study, data underwent iterative analysis (Tracy, 2013) and consisted of three interviews, 109 tweets, five editorials/articles, and seven police department documents. The results of the study indicate that stealing thunder via Twitter may function well in an imminent threat crisis and has the potential to save lives. Stealing thunder may also hold potential for rumor management during a crisis. To maintain stolen thunder and its associated benefits, a new strategy is presented: filling the silence. Findings support the call for more research on the Situational Theory of Crisis Communication's base responses

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(Coombs, 2007, 2016).

2. Literature review

This section first presents a brief overview of the case, followed by a review of the literature on crisis communication and the use of Twitter in emergencies.

2.1. Background on the Columbia Mall Shooting

On January 25, 2014, Marcus Aguilar opened fire in a store within the Columbia Mall in Columbia, Maryland, killing Brianna Benlolo and Tyler Johnson. The start time of the shooting was at 11:15 a.m., which notably mimics the start time of the Columbine High School Shooting from 1999 (Howard County Police Department, 2014). The shooter then exited the store, opened fire and shot a woman in her foot, before taking his own life. There were no connections between Aguilar and the victims, and evidence was later released that Aguilar was suffering from mental health issues.

2.2. Twitter as a crisis communication channel

Crisis communication scholarship reveals that Twitter is especially effective as an instant, two-way primary communication channel (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2010; Choi, 2012; Lee & Cho, 2011; van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2013). This is due to Twitter's short length (140 characters), ability to alert users to new tweets, and accessibility from smartphones (Choi, 2012; van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2013). In an active-shooter crisis, frequent information distributed via Twitter can instantaneously satisfy publics' information needs, and it is near impossible to overload publics with too much information (Stephens et al., 2013).

Twitter is a unique channel because it can facilitate two-way symmetrical communication, which continues to be considered an excellent public relations practice (e.g., Grunig, 2009; Lee & Cho, 2011; Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011; Veenstra, Iyer, Hossain, & Park, 2014). While true two-way symmetrical communication may be idealistic, Twitter does remove some of the power dynamics because the originator of the message does not have control of the conversations surrounding tweets (Gilpin, 2010). The highly interactional nature of Twitter also may produce opportunities for relationship building (Briones et al., 2010; Choi, 2012; Grunig, 2009; Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013).

2.2.1. Police and Twitter

In the most recent *Census of State and Local Law Enforcement* (2008), there were 17, 985 state and local police agencies in the U.S. (Reaves, 2011) and at the time of this paper being written, the *International Association Chiefs of Police Center for Social Media* (2015) reported that 3545 agencies have social media. Over 75 percent of the top 61 largest police departments have adopted at least one form of social media and almost half of those departments are active users (Lieberman, Koetzle, & Sakivama, 2013). Half of the U.S. cities with populations greater than 300,000 have active Twitter accounts (Heverin & Zach, 2010). The limited research on police and social media indicates that police departments are not using social media to its full capability (Heverin & Zach, 2010; Lieberman et al., 2013). Indeed, many city police departments use their Twitter accounts in a one-directional fashion to push information out to the public (Heverin & Zach, 2010).

Given the above literature review, this study asks:

RQ1a: How can Twitter be used successfully as a primary communication channel for instant, two-way communication during and immediately after a crisis?

RQ1b: What are the limitations of Twitter as a primary crisis communication channel?

2.2.2. Reducing noise

Primary channels are often seen as more credible during crises than secondary channels, such as journalistic news media (Stephens et al., 2013). Crises also no longer have to be filtered through "gatekeepers" like the media (Lee & Cho, 2011). In some cases this is believed to have led to noise reduction during and after crises (Lieberman et al., 2013; Veenstra et al., 2014; Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010). This may be an important opportunity for police departments since the media heavily reports crime, which "may lead to a distorted view of crime, an overestimation of violent crimes, and in particular, an increased overall fear of crime and victimization" (Lieberman et al., 2013, p. 440-441).

One form of noise is a rumor. A rumor is an inaccurate statement that is spread about an entity, object, or event (Coombs, 2015a). Social media has the potential to perpetuate rumors, yet through monitoring it may also lead to their early detection (Coombs, 2015a). Early detection allows the organization to develop a response with the correct information and potentially prevent the rumor from continuing to spread (Coombs, 2015a; Oh, Agrawal, & Rao, 2013). Therefore, this study explores:

RQ2: How, if at all, can police departments use Twitter to reduce noise in a crisis?

2.2.3. Stealing thunder

Stealing thunder has its roots in the American court system (Coombs, 2015b; Dolnik, Case, & Williams, 2003; Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993). It was a courtroom strategy where negative information was revealed first by oneself or a lawyer (Williams et al., 1993). Research finds that stealing thunder leads to an increase in perceived credibility of the attorney and the defendant that stole thunder. As a result of these positive findings, researchers concluded that stealing thunder had promise not just

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