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Understanding the use of social media by organisations for crisis communication

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ABSTRACT

Many businesses have commenced using social media for crisis communication with stakeholders. However there is little guidance in literature to assist organisational crisis managers with the selection of an appropriate crisis response strategy. Traditional theories on crisis communication may not adequately represent the social media context. This study took a qualitative approach and explored organisational use of social media for crisis communication at seventeen large Australian organisations. An analysis of 15,650 Facebook and Twitter messages was conducted, drawing on the lens of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Findings suggested that when large Australian organisations responded to crises via social media, they lacked an awareness of the potential of social media for crisis communication. Organisations often did not respond to stakeholder messages or selected crisis response strategies that may increase reputational risk. The paper contributes important understandings of organisational social media use for crisis communication. It also assists crisis managers by providing six crisis response positions and a taxonomy of social media crisis messages that stakeholders may send to organisations. Key implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Social media is important recent addition to organisational crisis communication tools. Conveniently and quickly accessible by vast numbers of individuals and organisations, social media can be deployed by organisations to communicate crisis information to dispersed stakeholders (Park, Cha, Kim, & Jeong, 2012). According to experts, there is an important dimension to organisational crisis communication (Bucher, Fieseler, & Suphan, 2013), extending to crisis communication by social media (Ki & Nekmat, 2014). When using social media, organisations can respond to stakeholders' questions and concerns, potentially improving organisational understandings of stakeholders' crisis needs, providing greater clarity and preserving or enhancing organisational reputation (Hurk, 2013).

While social media has enabled organisations to have direct communication with stakeholders, it has increased organisations' vulnerability during a crisis as it can facilitate the spread of it (Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015). Despite the importance of social media, still

businesses find it challenging using social media effectively for crisis communication (ContinuityInsights, 2014; Li & Li, 2014; Parsons, 2011). So far limited number of studies have examined the use of social media as a communication tool during real organisational crises not in experiments (Ki & Nekmat, 2014) explaining why various researchers have called for more research to be conducted in social media crisis communication (Floreddu, Cabiddu, & Evaristo, 2014; Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2014). This research adds to the nascent body of studies in the field. As the researchers resided in Australia at the time of study, and as large organisations (defined by Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002) as organisations with 200 or more employees) are the main Australian organisational users of social media (Sensis, 2014), we elected to study crisis communication by social media at large Australian organisations.

This paper aims to explore how organisations use social media to interact with stakeholders during crises. The paper makes several important theoretical and practical contributions. Firstly, it contributes to filling the knowledge gap associated with organisational use of social media in crisis communication as a novel communication method by providing valuable insights in terms of the use of social media by organisations for crisis communication and responds to recent calls for systematic studies in the field (Jin

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et al., 2014; Ki & Nekmat, 2014). Secondly, it increases scholarly understandings of organisational social media usage for crisis communication by identifying a set of six positions that organisations can take in their communication with stakeholders on social media during a crisis. Thirdly, it develops a unique taxonomy of social media crisis messages that organisations may receive from stakeholders and examines organisational response to each message cluster. This taxonomy increases the scholarly understanding of stakeholders' interactions with organisations via social media during a crisis and helps organisations planning for crisis communication to prepare an appropriate response for each stakeholder message cluster. Fourthly, this study applies situational crisis communication theory in a social media context and provides useful insight in terms of the need for further development of this theory in the social media context.

The remainder of the paper is set out as follows. First, we establish a theoretical background from a review and synthesis of relevant literature. Following a description of the research method we present key results and findings. Finally we discuss academic and managerial implications from the findings, draw conclusions and offer final remarks.

2. Literature review

This section provides a theoretical background synthesised from a literature search of the information systems, social media and crisis communication academic literature, where we sought articles on social media crisis communication and underlying concepts. The section briefly reviews (1) social media, (2) crisis communication and situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs & Holladay, 2002) and (3) the use of social media in organisational crisis communication.

2.1. Social media

Social media has been defined as "a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). The two most popular social media channels in Australia are Facebook and Twitter (Sensis, 2014). Using the channels, users can post status updates, comment on others' status and tag other users, among other activities (Davenport, Bergman, Bergman, & Fearrington, 2014; Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007). We define a status update as a message that social media users proactively post on their social media pages.

Social media has changed the business setting for organisations and has provided both opportunities and challenges for them (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). On the positive side, social media brings various benefits to organisations. Firstly, it has enabled organisations to have an active and engaged relationship with their stakeholders, listen to them and respond to their requests (Castriotta, Floreddu, Di Guardo, & Cabiddu, 2013; Floreddu et al., 2014). Secondly, it allows organisations to have immediate access to real-time data created by their stakeholders, seek information about stakeholders and receive feedback about their products and services (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013). Thirdly, it has created a cost-efficient way of communication for organisations as stakeholders can see organisations' replies to other stakeholders' questions which can be their own questions (Bygstad & Presthus, 2012). Due to these benefits, organisations use social media for different purposes such as marketing, engaging with stakeholders and responding to their requests, receiving feedback about their products and services with fast speed and at a low cost and finding innovative ideas (Floreddu et al., 2014).

On the other hand, social media has also challenged organisations (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). Social media has created a space in which stakeholders are enabled to share information about organisations at high speed and express their ideas about them, while organisations have less control over what is being said about them (Effing & Spil, 2016; Pang, Hassan, & Chong, 2014). This organisational lack of control in the social media context, has increased organisations' vulnerability and consequently, the frequency and severity of business crises (Gruber, Smerek, Thomas-Hunt, & James, 2015; Kietzmann et al., 2011).

As this research is focusing on organisations' use of social media for crisis communication, we will review social media use for crisis communication later in this section but first review crisis communication and crisis response strategy.

2.2. Crisis communication and situational crisis communication theory

For an organisation a crisis can be defined as "an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organisation's performance and generate negative outcomes" (Coombs, 2011, p. 3). When crises are poorly managed, organisations and stakeholders can suffer financial, physical, health and other forms of harm (Heath & Millar, 2004). A key feature of crisis management is crisis communication as it can bolster or harm an organisation's reputation and mitigate or exacerbate adverse consequences (Marra, 1999). We define a crisis response as crisis communication messages disseminated by an organisation during a crisis (Benoit, 1997; Hale, Dulek, & Hale, 2005).

Prior crisis communication research has studied the nature of crisis response in terms of information (Sturges, 1994) and response strategies (Coombs, 2007). Sturges (1994) identified three types of information disseminated to stakeholders. *Instructing information* informs stakeholders how to protect themselves physically from a crisis. *Adjusting information* helps stakeholders cope psychologically by expressing sympathy or explaining the crisis. *Internalising information* is the information that stakeholders use to "formulate an image about the organisation" (Sturges, 1994, p. 308). However, Sturges (1994) noted that issuing internalising information in a crisis could lead stakeholders to perceive an organisation as self-interested.

Crisis response strategies have been extensively studied by Coombs (e.g. 2006, 2007, 2011) who defines them as "what an organisation says and does after a crisis hits" (Coombs, 2006, p. 245). A crisis response strategy "emphasises the way crisis communication is used to achieve certain outcomes" (Coombs, 2011, p. 130). Coombs (2011) identified four clusters of crisis response strategies (Table 1): *denial*, *diminishment*, *rebuilding* and *bolstering*. Denial strategies attempt to demonstrate that the organisation is not responsible for the crisis occurring. Diminishment strategies aim to lessen the attribution of control over the crisis or the negative effects of the crisis. Rebuilding strategies attempt to improve the organisation's reputation by compensating and apologising. Bolstering strategies aim to build a favourable connection between the organisation and stakeholders. Table 1 shows the ten response strategies corresponding to each cluster.

Coombs and Holladay (2002) suggested Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) to help organisations select the appropriate response strategies to minimize the crisis reputational threat (Coombs, 2007). An and Cheng's (2010) meta-analysis of crisis communication research in the past thirty years shows that SCCT is at the top of the list of the most frequently cited theories in crisis communication area. While SCCT was developed before the