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What do citizens communicate about during crises? Analyzing twitter use during the 2011 UK riots

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ABSTRACT

The use of social media during crises has been explored in a variety of natural and man-made crisis situations. Yet, most of these studies have focused exclusively on the communication strategies and messages sent by crisis responders. Surprisingly little research has been done on how crisis publics (i.e., those people interested in or affected by the crisis) use social media during such events. Our article addresses this gap in the context of citizens' Twitter use during the 2011 riots in the UK. Focusing on communications with and about police forces in two cities, we analyzed 5984 citizen tweets collected during the event for content and sentiment. Comparing the two cases, our findings suggest that citizens' Twitter communication follows a general logic of concerns, but can also be influenced very easily by single, non-crisis related events such as perceived missteps in a police force's Twitter communication. Our study provides insights into citizens' concerns and communication patterns during crises adding to our knowledge about the dynamics of citizens' use of social media in such times. It further highlights the fragmentation in Twitter audiences especially in later stages of the crisis. These observations can be utilized by police forces to help determine the appropriate organizational responses that facilitate coping across various stages of crisis events. In addition, they illustrate limitations in current theoretical understandings of crisis response strategies, adding the requirement for adaptivity, flexibility and ambiguity in organizational responses to address the observed plurivocality of crisis audiences.

1. Introduction

Crises of all types, be they caused by natural hazards or by man-made situations, are characterized by threat, urgency and uncertainty (Rosenthal, Charles, & t Hart, P., 1989). In these situations it is vital for citizens to obtain clear information on events and direction for action, as well as assurance of their safety. Otherwise, social unrest and a breakdown of public order are possible, as was tragically demonstrated, for instance, in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005 (Nelson, Sigal, & Zambrano, 2010). Communication between crisis response organizations and the public is, therefore, essential for coping with crises. Conversely, responders' failures in addressing a crisis have often to do with communication-related challenges (Allen, Karanasios, & Norman, 2014; Fischer, Fischbach, & Possega, 2016; Van Gorp, Pogrebnyakov, & Maldonado, 2015).

Numerous studies have therefore aimed to understand how crises responders do and should communicate with affected citizens (e.g., Mergel, 2014; Takahashia, Tandoc, & Carmichael, 2015; Wukich & Mergel, 2015). The opposite view – crisis communication by citizens with and about crises responders – has received considerably less attention (Pang & Ng, 2016). This one-sided view is problematic, as the ways crisis communication is accomplished is shifting, primarily due to the growing role of social media during crisis events.

Social media, including networking sites such as Facebook and microblogging services such as Twitter, afford quick, efficient and widespread distribution of multiple-source information, warnings and calls for action, as well as the collection of information to improve situational awareness (Wukich, 2015). The use of social media during crises represents a shift in crisis communication from the mere transmission of a message to interaction between organizations and the public. As Wukich (2015) phrased it, "the public becomes a much more active and potentially empowered participant in the event, as opposed

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to a passive receiver of responder-produced messages" (p. 132). It is therefore important to understand communicative behaviors of crises publics, as this provides vital knowledge for crisis responders on how to effectively prepare, shape and manage communications during ongoing crisis events (Brummette & Fussell Siso, 2015).

Using the well-studied case of the 2011 UK riots, our interest in this paper focused on citizens' Twitter communications with and about police forces to better understand the usage of the medium and the changing concerns of publics voiced through social media throughout a crisis event. We focus on Twitter, as this fast-paced short-messaging service is one of the most frequently adopted social media platforms by police forces (and first responders more generally) for all phases of crisis management. In our study, we concentrate on the stage of crisis response (Coombs, 2012) given that the UK riots were a public disorder event in which the use of Twitter followed the sudden escalation of disorder. According to Panagiotopoulos, Barnett, Bigdeli, and Sams (2016), these types of events do not give the opportunity to observe a pre-crisis stage, which differentiates them from, for example, natural hazards. Further, we focus on police, as police organizations are a primary player in nearly all forms of crisis situations standing at the forefront of efforts to keep 'law and order' during tense and often chaotic times. Police forces are thus often the most visible representatives of a government and its ability to react to and manage crisis events.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: in the next section, we review the literature on crisis communication and on social media as a crisis communication channel. Next, the study context and the research design are explained. Subsequently, we present and discuss the results of the fieldwork. Finally, we describe the theoretical and practical implications of our findings in answer to our main research questions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Crisis events and crisis communication

Several terms for crisis exists and have often been used interchangeably (e.g., emergency, disaster or catastrophe; Fischer et al., 2016). In this article, we adopt the definition of Kreps (1984), who defines crises as "events, observable in time and space, in which societies or their larger subunits (e.g., communities, regions) incur physical damages and losses and/or disruption of their routine functioning" (p. 312). Crises move through several stages with disparate characteristics and requirements for governments and first responders. Lettieri, Masella, and Radaelli (2009) differentiated four stages in a crisis lifecycle: two pre-crisis phases (mitigation and preparedness) and two post-crisis phases (response and recovery). Coombs (2012) referred to three phases, which overlap with those of Lettieri et al. (2009): pre-crisis (prevention and preparation), crisis response (actual response to a crisis), and post-crisis (preparation for the next and commitments during the crisis with follow-up information). Crisis response is probably the most critical and important phase, as it is highly visible to citizens and significantly influences public opinion and what citizens think of responders handling the crisis.

An important component of crisis management is crisis communication. During a critical event, communication serves multiple purposes from information collection to coordination, information dissemination, planning for and management of a crisis, but also relationship building (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). According to Terp Søland (2016), during crises "a legitimacy gap may occur if there is a perceived discrepancy between an organization's actions and society's expectations. Such a gap can threaten both the image and reputation of an organization" (p. 7). Effective crisis communication can help preventing or closing such gaps, restoring the legitimacy and reputation of crisis responders (Coombs & Holladay, 2014), particularly when their image has been damaged as a result of the crisis itself (Schultz, Utz, & Goritz, 2011). The role of communication for responders' reputation and legitimacy are of such importance to organizations that an extensive body of knowledge concerned with crisis communication has developed, and several theoretical approaches for responding to crises exist within the literature. Two of the most important ones are Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 1995) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2012).

According to Benoit's *Image Repair Theory* (1995, 1997), organizations involved in crisis events are liable to receive attacks from the public. Such attacks or complaints have two components: the accused is held responsible for an action and that act is considered offensive. Because both the image of an organization and the threat to that image are perceptual, effective communication may mitigate such threats. Consequently, Image Repair Theory focuses on the content of crisis communication messages and presents five broad categories of image repair strategies (i.e., communication strategies): denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of the event, corrective action, and mortification. These strategies are grounded in a belief that communication (words and actions) affects how the public perceives the organization involved in the crisis (Coombs, 2014) and can thus be actively used in shaping and changing such perceptions.

Benoit's Image Repair Theory has received wide criticism. Of particular importance is the fact that the author ignores the contextual background of organizations and crises, as his theory builds on a rhetorical tradition, which emphasizes the spoken or written word rather than the environment and the context (Skriver Jensen, 2014).

Opposite Benoit's theory, Coombs's theory is primarily context-oriented and based on public relations (Coombs, 2012). *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* (SCCT) explains how communication protects an organization's reputation during a crisis, but goes one step further than Image Repair Theory by linking crisis response strategies and elements of the crisis situation (Bell, 2010). On the one hand, the theory predicts reputational threat through three factors: initial crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior relational reputation. On the other hand, it recognizes that crisis response strategies vary depending on the type of crisis and the stakeholder's attribution of responsibility (see Table 1), which results in four communication strategies adjusted to different crises and publics (Bell, 2010; Skriver Jensen, 2014): denial, diminishment, rebuilding, and bolstering (Coombs, 2012).

Despite the contributions of these two theories to the field of crisis communication, both Coombs and Benoit focus primarily on the sender, which is why they neglect the receivers' perception of the sender's stimuli choice of strategy. Further, they pay limited attention to the active role of citizens: both focus squarely on organizational communication and do not recognize that crisis communication may consist of communicative actions between several senders and receivers (Johansen & Frandsen, 2007). This reduces their potential to guide organizations in shaping as well as adjusting and flexibly reacting to (potential) shifts in communications by crisis publics.

Only recently, SCCT's researchers have begun to examine how crisis

Table 1
Crises types by level of responsibility.
(Source: Coombs, 2014: 150).

Crises types
Victim cluster: Very little attribution of responsibility
Natural disasters
Rumors
Workplace violence
Malevolence
Accidental cluster: Low attribution of responsibility
Challenges
Technical-error accidents
Technical error-product harm
Preventable cluster: Strong attribution of responsibility
Human-error accidents
Human error-product harm
Organizational misdeeds

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