A COMPARISON OF PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA DURING A CAMPUS CRISIS: USE VERSUS EFFECTIVENESS

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ABSTRACT

Timing is critical when communicating during a crisis. The Clery Act outlines how universities must communicate information regarding a campus crisis to their stakeholders. College students are key stakeholders in the university community who create online social networks in addition to their interpersonal social networks. By including social media in the crisis communications plan, universities can comply with the Clery Act while reaching a key stakeholder group through their online social networks. The purpose of this study was to explore the extent to which differences existed regarding which types of communications media and tools were used to communicate with students during a campus crisis based upon perceptions of use versus perceptions of effectiveness. Results showed that university relations professionals perceived they used communications media and tools that allowed for almost instantaneous dissemination of messages to their student populations during a crisis. Social media were not rated as high as the university website, e-mail, text, and phone notifications.

INTRODUCTION

Communicating with speed and accuracy during a crisis is crucial. Organizations must be prepared to quickly put out information to their stakeholders during a crisis. A growing number of individuals receive information about crises through social media (Coombs, 2007) where messages can be shared across large audiences with the click of a mouse (Coombs & Holladay, 2009). Just as outsiders can post information about an organization, organizations can also use social media to communicate with their stakeholders quickly.

The office of university relations plays a key role on campus, serving as the conduit between the university and its publics. This role becomes especially important during a crisis when timely communications are necessary. It's expected that information be communicated to key stakeholders quickly (Jablonski, McClellan, & Zdzarski, 2008).

Students are key stakeholders at universities. The Clery Act states that colleges should communicate crises immediately with the campus community (Security on Campus, 2011). Social media is used as a form of communication for potential students (Graduate Management Admission Council, 2009; Kottner, 2010; Lorenzetti, 2010). This pre-established form of

communication can be used during a crisis. College students, as key stakeholders at colleges, communicate differently than other stakeholder groups. University relations professionals need to recognize these differences and place information where the students will see it quickly. When students receive information about a crisis they will pass it on to others in their social network.

Another key principle of crisis response is that organizations present information in a variety of media channels. Colleges should use redundant methods of communicating (Jablonski et. al., 2008). It is especially important to use social media during a crisis on a college campus. Not all students check e-mail frequently enough to receive breaking messages. Students are connected via phones, tablets, computers, etc. They are constantly connected to their phones and they are constantly connected to each other. They use social media to create friendships and share information (Kavanaugh, Carroll, Rosson, Zin, & Reese, 2005; Sun, Youn, Wu, & Kuntaraporn, 2006). Thus, it is important for universities to use the communications media and tools the students are using.

No one communications media or tool is best for communicating with stakeholders during a crisis. Redundant messages placed in multiple channels will increase the spread of the message. Other channels shouldn't be abandoned, but reinforced.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Crisis Communications and Social Media

For the purposes of this study, crisis communications is operationally defined using Coombs and Holladay (2010) as "the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation" (p. 20).

Effective, timely communication is critical during a crisis. The amount of time an organization has to assess a situation and communicate with its stakeholders has been cut down to mere minutes with the advent of social media. Messages can be delivered almost instantaneously using social media (Wright & Hinson, 2009) and have a higher potential reach than their traditional media counterparts (Breakenridge, 2009).

The number of individuals who turn to social media during a crisis is growing (Coombs & Holladay, 2009; Coombs, 2007). Ongoing updates are shared through social networks (Breakenridge, 2009; Macias, Hilyard, & Freimuth, 2009; Palser, 2010; Procopio & Procopio, 2007). Individuals use different media to meet their "informational, social, and emotional needs of citizens during a crisis'' (Carey, 2002, p. 206).

When a crisis on campus occurs, it is the expectation of stakeholders, including students that information will be communicated instantaneously (Jablonski, et. al., 2008). The Clery Act states that colleges should "immediately notify the campus community upon the confirmation of a significant emergency or dangerous situation involving an immediate threat to the health or safety of students or staff" (Security on Campus, 2011, p. 3).

Crises on college campuses receive wider attention in the Internet age (Catullo, 2008). "Incidents of violence on campus are not new. What is new is the immediacy of the visual and emotional impact of violent acts due to the media and the Internet" (Jablonski, et. al., 2008, p. 30).

University Relations

The office of university relations functions, at most colleges, to match strategies with the campus mission, promoting the university to the campus and local community, and prepare for crises (Powell, 2009). Crisis planning helps university relations professionals determine what crises may impact a college in advance of a crisis so that plans can be made and communications can be drafted in advance (Zdziarski, Dunkel, Rollo, & Associates, 2007).

College students

College students are among the highest users of social media. Approximately 73% of teens aged 12-17 and young adults aged 18-29 use social networking sites (Pew Research Center, 2010). This percentage increased to 76% in 2012 with 42% of those aged 18-34 reporting that they check social media sites several times a day (Pew Research Center, 2012). They use social media to create friendships and share information (Kavanaugh et. al., 2005; Sun et. al., 2006).

Colleges have recognized this high level of usage and have incorporated social media into recruiting efforts (Graduate Management Admission Council, 2009; Kottner, 2010; Lorenzetti, 2010). These individuals will continue to grow their online social networks as they attend college.

Research Question

To what extent do differences exist based upon perceptions of use versus perceptions of effectiveness regarding which types of communications media and tools were used to communicate with students during a campus crisis? Due to the exploratory nature of this

research, there was insufficient prior research to formulate hypotheses. Instead the following research question directed this study:

     RQ1:   What differences exist in the perceptions of use versus the perceptions of effectiveness for social media during a campus crisis situation?

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Participants coded as Chief Public Relations Officers in the Higher Education Publications, Inc.'s Higher Education Directory were asked to participate in this study (Burke & Rodenhouse, 2011). A total of 330 individuals responded for a response rate of 13.57%. Forty-six respondents did not meet the screening criteria and thus did not complete the survey. An additional fifty-six respondents ended the survey before completion.

Measurement

The questionnaire was designed to measure variables regarding the effectiveness of contacting students during a crisis through various media. Respondents were asked their perceptions of effectiveness using a 5-point Likert scale with "1" being *not effective* and "5" being *frequently effective.* Respondents were asked their perceptions of use using a 5-point Likert-like scale with "1" being *not used* and "5" being *frequently used.*

Data Analysis Procedure

A number of variables were measured with emphasis being placed on responses relating to perceptions of social media effectiveness and use. Responses were tabulated using frequencies and percentages. Interval data were evaluated using inferential statistics. The extent to which differences exist based on perceptions of use versus perceptions of effectiveness were presented using a series of paired *t*-tests. A level of $< .05$ was used as level of significance.

Demographic Data

Demographic data collected for this study pertained to institutional characteristics: institutional type; community population; campus enrollment; and the percentage of students living on campus versus off campus.

RESULTS

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the perceptions of use versus the perceptions of effectiveness. With regards to institutional type, a majority of respondents represented private, four-year institutions (46.3%). A majority of respondents represented campuses with enrollment of 5,000 or less (55.3%). Respondents represented campuses where the percentage of students living on campus was fewer than 24% (39.2%) and 25-49% (25.8%).

Differences in Perceptions of Use Versus Perceptions of Effectiveness

A comparison between respondents' perceptions of use versus perceptions of effectiveness led to a finding of significant differences in several areas: campus newspapers, $t(228) = 5.781$, $p = .000$, local newspapers, $t(227) = 6.202$, $p = .000$, local television, $t(225) = 3.577$, $p = .000$, university websites, $t(231) = 6.383$, $p = .000$, university dark sites, $t(218)$ -6.135, $p = .000$, YouTube, $t(221) = -5.793$, $p = .000$, blogs, $t(219) = 4.101$, $p = .000$, and email, $t(231) = 9.390$, $p = .000$. Table 1 presents the means of the two variables. A level of $< .05$ was used as level of significance.

Respondents indicated that they used their university's website ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 0.48$), although their perceptions of effectiveness ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 0.73$) were slightly less. Respondents indicated that they perceived dark sites as being neither effective nor ineffective ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.61$) for communicating with students during a crisis, but perceptions of use ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.67$) were rated with lower frequency. YouTube was perceived as being somewhat effective ($M = 2.11$, $SD = 1.23$), but respondents indicated that use of YouTube ($M = 1.73$, $SD = 1.17$) to communicate with students during a crisis was seldom. Respondents perceived that blogs were somewhat effective ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.33$), but indicated that use was seldom ($M = 1.92$, $SD = 1.35$). Email was often used ($M = 4.82$, $SD = 1.47$) to communicate with students during a crisis, but was perceived to not be as effective ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.93$) for communicating with students during a crisis. Social media including Facebook, Twitter, text messages and text alerts showed no significant differences in perceptions of use versus perceptions of effectiveness.

The results suggest that communications media and tools perceived to be most effective were also those perceived to be used most often. This list includes university websites, e-mails, text messages, and alerts via phone and texts where the university controls the messages. Facebook was rated lower in terms of perceptions of use and effectiveness. Twitter was rated below local television and radio.

TABLE 1: DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF USE VERSUS PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVENESS REGARDING MEDIA

	n	Use	Effectiveness	t	df	p
		Means				
Email	231	4.82	4.26	9.390	230	.000*
University Website	231	4.81	4.51	6.383	230	.000*
Alerts (text)	229	4.51	4.51	.000	228	1.000
Alerts (phone)	226	4.09	3.98	1.535	225	.126
Facebook	228	3.91	3.95	.639	227	.523
Radio (local)	228	3.23	2.89	4.909	227	.000*
Television (local)	225	3.17	2.92	3.577	224	.000*
Twitter	226	3.11	3.06	.533	225	.581
Univ. Website (for mobile)	216	2.95	3.32	3.911	215	.000*
Newspapers (local)	227	2.61	2.16	6.202	226	.000*
University Dark site	218	2.46	2.88	6.135	217	.000*
Newspapers (campus)	228	2.26	1.85	5.781	227	.000*
Radio (campus)	219	2.19	2.12	.966	218	.335
Television (campus)	212	2.12	2.03	1.134	211	.258
Blogs	219	1.92	2.21	4.101	218	.000*
YouTube	221	1.73	2.11	5.793	220	.000*

*Indicates significant difference at the .05 level.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The rationale of this study was to examine the extent to which differences exist based upon perceptions of use versus perceptions of effectiveness regarding the types of communications media and tools used to communicate with students during a campus crisis.

The findings of this study suggest that the university relations professionals surveyed perceived they used communications media and tools that allowed for almost instantaneous dissemination of messages to their student populations during a crisis, but focused mainly on using their university website, e-mail, and notifications via text and telephone rather than choosing social

media options. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter, where message composition was controlled, but message delivery was not as controlled, were rated lower.

Traditional media channels such as local television, radio, and newspapers were perceived as being more effective than social media such as YouTube and blogs. University relations professionals from institutions with higher enrollments or larger communities responded that they used traditional media more than their counterparts. This is most likely because traditional media are more plentiful in larger towns. While some of the findings of this study supported continued used of traditional media to reach students during a crisis, it is important to note that the actual differences were not significant enough to warrant change in practice and policies.

"No single medium meets all of the informational, social, and emotional needs of citizens during a crisis" (Carey, 2002, p. 206). In the aftermath of campus crises at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University, social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, were used to communicate with family and friends that students were safe. They were also used to help students grieve for their fallen classmates (Jones, 2007; Northern Illinois University, 2010). If students do not get the message through one medium, they will receive it on another. They will pass on their information to their friends through texts and their social network. This is especially important because the media that students use may not be the same media used to put out messages.

Using social media increases message reach with message placement occurring in yet another media channel. Social media are a cost-effective, efficient method to deliver crisis information to a large group almost instantaneously. Applications can be configured to deliver messages through multiple platforms instantly. Because social media are an integral part of a college student's online social network, there is an increased chance that the student will actually see the message. They will also pass on information, often in its unadulterated state.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study includes a few limitations. It examines university relations professionals' perceptions of the inclusion of various types of media in the crisis communications plan, but does not examine how crises and subsequent messaging were handled at the institutions. This study also focuses on perceptions of university relations professionals and not an institution's crisis communications plan itself.

Responses in this self-report study are limited in that they are indirect measures of behaviors and attitudes. Caution should be taken in generalizations regarding the population's actual behavior. Due to the low response rate of 13.57%, caution should be taken in generalizing these results to a larger population.

Additional study is needed to examine the perceptions and actual actions taken on a university campus during a crisis regarding which types of media work best for communicating with students during a crisis.

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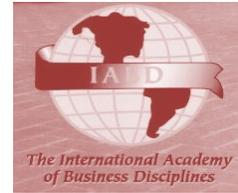
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