
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

New Dilemma that Social Media Poses for Crisis Communication

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| ABSTRACT

The popularization of social media has brought about a major change in the whole society. Crisis communication, an increasingly essential subject in a risky society, can not be spared, but not enough attention has been paid to it. The objective of the study is to unveil the impact social media have on crisis communication. By means of literature reading analysis, the author looks into the existing literature and sorts out 3 major differences social media make to crisis communication: the way crises are constructed and spread, the redistribution of discursive power in crisis communication, and instinct features of social media which affect crisis communication. After carefully interpreting, the author comes to the conclusion that social media is playing such a core part in crisis communication that higher demand for crisis communication management ought to be set.

| KEYWORDS

Social Media, Crisis Communication, Crisis Management, Communication Studies

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Crisis communication is defined as “the process of information exchange between government departments, organizations, the media and the public before, after the crisis and in the course of its development” (Shi, 2004). On the basis of Communication Studies, it developed in conjunction with Management. It is a relatively new field of scholarship, first being paid attention to in the 1980s because of the “Tylenol Incident” crisis of Johnson & Johnson in the United States (Shi, 2008). In China, it began to receive wide attention during the SARS period in 2003. Nowadays, western crisis communication study keeps pace with the developing society in various fields, emphasizing internal information communication promotion and organizational optimization (Jin, 2020); Meanwhile, crisis communication study in China is constantly improved in two directions: government affairs and enterprise affairs, with the focus on practical research in a specific issue.

At present, crisis breaking out and going viral on social media has become a clear trend in mainland China, the disposals of which, however, are always unsatisfactory. Sometimes the administrators hide the news; other times, they just respond too passively to be trusted. The reason, in large part, is that crisis administrators have not advanced their management in pace with the social media era. The author hopes to summarize how social media affects the spread of the crisis so as to guide people to learn and change.

In the field of crisis communication, the analysis of the characteristics of the new era of communication is relatively superficial and one-sided, with most literature in the past five years focusing on specific practical strategies. Given the present situation, the author tries to make a deep analysis of social media and figure out what it would bring to crisis communication.

2. Social Media have An Impact on the Formation and Development of the Crisis

Regarding the definition of crisis, there is no acknowledged statement in academic circles, but the basic meaning is roughly the same. Rosenthal et al.'s (1989) is chosen here: “The crisis is a serious threat to the basic values of a social system and the structure

of the code of conduct, and in the case of high time pressure and uncertainty, the key decision-making events must be made." Whether it poses a "serious threat" and whether key decisions need to be made immediately is beyond the objective nature of the event. They depend on people's subjective judgment.

In the era of traditional media, due to the involvement of "gatekeepers" and time delay in information dissemination, the crises were able to be kept known on a small scale so that the subjective reality of the crisis was grasped mainly by administrators. Crisis management at that time had a relatively fixed process; it often just did "aftercare" things. Administrators took the initiative to judge the severity of the crisis, dealt with contradictions, then selectively disclosed information to the public.

It was the involvement of social media that made the crisis a media event. Thanks to the Internet, the public has access to gain all kinds of information, of which they have their own critical understanding and more or less participate in the construction of the implication of the crisis. Social media provide an exact platform for an individual to exchange ideas, which also become a perfect place for them to fight for their rights. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic is a public health crisis, but when the public angrily asks for more information and dispute policies on social platforms, it becomes a media crisis as well.

On the other hand, new contradictions arise when different information and opinion find each other, which burst into major crises more easily on a social platform. For example, in the 2022 Tangshan restaurant attack, it was online public discussion that led to the introduction of anti-gang crime and gender issues that triggered a severe distrust of the government, without which it may only be a criminal case confined to the police office (Zhang, 2010). These crises come directly because of social media, which also ferment quickly and develop without regularity, bringing new challenges for crisis administrators.

Crisis lurking everywhere is the basic state of the risk society, and social media form the background of the risk society in a new era (Hu, 2016). The concept of a "risk society" was proposed by the German scholar Ulrich Beck in 1986, stating that technological developments have led to a surge in social uncertainty, and the occurrence of risks is not only inevitable but also difficult to foresee (Chen, 2008). Creating contradiction and adding uncertainty to society, social media become the basic setting of the risk society as well as the chaotic background of crisis outbreaks.

3. Social Media Catalyze the Formation of a Confrontational Force in the Spread of Crises

The French philosopher Foucault put forward the concept of "discourse is power", stating that "social and political power always operates through discourse" (Li, 2009). Therefore, subjects having the right to speak have a greater advantage in the game of power. And the redistribution of discourse brought about by social media "affects the way people perceive, imagine, discuss and construct public crises" (Hu, 2016).

Before the era of social media, elites in the political, economic, and cultural fields dominated discourse and formed an uncontractual alliance with traditional media such as newspapers and television stations, jointly monopolizing information and voice in the public domain. The general public had no choice but to learn about crisis passively from an authority, knowing what they were allowed to know.

Social media provide equal opportunities for the general public to speak (Hu, 2016). Given the situation that traditional media failed to filter information, everyone can make their voices heard and put forward their own appeals. The platform's algorithms enable opinions to aggregate, and gradually virtual communities based on a certain topic are formed. The crowds are no longer a powerless mass but a mighty league, acting as a third-party force that significantly influences the spread of the crisis.

When people receive more information from sources outside the government and the professional media, changes in previous information asymmetry disadvantages make the public rely less on authority; thus, the traditional trust structure failed (Hu, 2016). In crisis communication, the public is no longer satisfied with the limited information provided by administrators and is beginning to ask for more.

In the process of continuous interactive dissemination of information, a new and influential role is formed: the opinion leaders. Opinion leaders, who are surrounded by people with similar hobbies and concepts, have a special social influence and play a unique and non-negligible role in the process of crisis dissemination, accelerating the redistribution of discourse order. In the study of the voice volume and timing change trend of Weibo subjects, scholars like Wang et al. (2020) concluded that in Weibo, government affairs agencies and news media, opinion leaders, and the general public exist in two discussion spaces, which coincides with the "two major public opinion fields" proposed by Nan Zhenzhong, former editor-in-chief of Xinhua News Agency. With the development of social media, opinion leaders and the public have their discourse power risen, constituting a new public opinion force and forming a "dynamic relationship of opposition or cooperation" with the authority (Zhou, 2014), which undoubtedly challenges the original discourse system in the confrontational process of crisis communication.

4. The Nature of Social Media Adds Complexity to Crisis Communication

Featuring great scale and real-time interaction, social media allow all kinds of information and viewpoints flooding in, stimulating resonance but also intensifying contradictions. At present, network consensus warfare accompanying crisis communication jointly creates a dynamic process of enduring interaction. Keeping a crisis event widely discussed requires the constant replenishment of new information (Zhang et al., 2019), and the influx of new information can trigger secondary public opinion, which exacerbates the crisis. Public opinion, especially during the crisis period, is associated with confusion about codecs (Zhang, 2010) and a mass of rumors. Combined with the “3F” hypothesis of crisis transmission, the “noise flow”, which includes rumors, is believed to make the chaos of the crisis transmission even more confusing.

Information cocoon is another threat. It is true that the recommendation algorithm of social media makes it easier to aggregate similar views, spread consensus through likes, comments, and forwards and forms “opinion groups” under the guidance of opinion leaders, which transforms individual opinions into communal ones. However, the algorithm is also likely to make an information cocoon. Solidified in small groups with people sharing similar views, netizens may find their stereotypes deepened and themselves less tolerant of dissidents. When receiving information that contradicts their own understanding, they are more likely to express xenophobic emotions in groups, escalating a network consensus warfare and making the administration of crisis communication even more difficult.

The use of multimedia is another characteristic of social media. Audio and video information which is biased toward emotional input, gradually replace text information which requires rational reading, keeping netizens from judging sensibly. Strong emotion is also an important feature of social media contexts, as studies have found that the emotional appeal of the public during crisis events is directly related to their acceptance of the government's crisis communication strategy (Shi & Qiu, 2018). In the discussion of crisis events, emotional communication that focuses only on emotional outpouring and disregards facts prevents not only the return of the truth but also precludes the possibility of solving problems through rational negotiation.

Moreover, at this stage, social media publicity and legalization in china are insufficient. The most popular social media in China are Weibo and Wechat, which are dominated by entertainment and social attributes. In recent years, most of China's network consensus warfare has erupted on Weibo. As a market-oriented platform in which “hot search” can be bought and sold, we can hardly say it reached a balance between economic and social interests, and such a platform is not suitable for public rational discussion. Also, in the case that the relevant laws are not complete enough, users making random remarks using anonymity and disrupting the public opinion field are also common to see.

The entire social media communication field contradicts the large-scale, fast-updating, irrational, and imperfect management system, forming a chaotic media space, which acts as a reflection of “truth decline” in the macro post-truth era. In the discourse of “emotion dominates the truth, arguments take precedence over facts” (Xiang, 2022), social media has become an accomplice to chaos, setting up obstacles to crisis communication and management.

5. Social Media Put Forward New Requirements for Crisis Administrators

Accept public subjects and compete with the public on an equal footing. As Habermas proposes, the establishment of intersubjectivity shifts from the “subject-object” relationship to the “subject-subject” relationship (Hu, 2013). The era of open and pluralistic social media has made traditional public opinion suppression impossible. Administrators who still have the idea of “official standards” will sooner or later lose popular support because of their mishandling of the crisis. In the era of democratic discussion and diminished authority on the social platform, administrators can only restore credibility if they “go into the water to engage in dialogue with the public on an equal footing, with a sincere attitude and real action.

Grasp the characteristics of social media communication and be equipped with social media mindset. What many managers still don't realize is that social media is not just a medium for publishing information (Zhang, 2016) but a communication tool, a mode of dialogue, and even a larger context of society. Administrators should actively set the agenda and take the initiative in crisis dissemination; Grasp the characteristics of emotional expression of social media, and strengthen emotional guidance during the period of crisis dissemination (Shi & Qiu, 2018); Connect and cultivate opinion leaders to convey information that penetrates deep into the public in the social media environment; Adopt social media communication channels as the basic social reality of the new era, and improve the supporting system and legal system on this basis.

Create positive trust from a critical and developmental perspective. Crisis communication theory has evolved a new crisis concept of “critical orientation” from previous “management orientation” and “rhetorical orientation”. The “critical orientation” of crisis communication views it as a “dynamic process of discursive conflict and reconciliation” (Shi, 2008). It seeks to build a healthy relationship between the administrators and society, on the whole, limit conflict to the event itself rather than raise it to trust and coordinate development in the midst of conflict. This requires crisis managers to actively interact with the

public during usual times, provide information immediately and proactively, and steer the crisis in the right direction so as to create a new image of being responsible and trustworthy (Jin, 2020).

Adapt to the risk society and enhance crisis awareness. It is pointless to ignore the dramatic changes in society and pray that the crisis will not happen to you. The complex and changing environment requires administrators to acquire professional knowledge of crisis communication, under the guidance of which they can understand the crisis and command the basic methods of crisis disposal. An integrated response system should be established, including early warning, quick response, and emergency treatment. Last but not least, enhancing crisis awareness that crisis occurrences are impermanent is of great significance, which can help maintain a proactive and flexible mentality and safeguard social stability with the determination to be in coexistence with the crisis.

6. Conclusion

Social media has constituted a social reality that cannot be ignored in crisis communication. The social media communication context has influenced the content, communication methods, effects, and impacts of crises, reshaping crisis communication in all aspects. But practically, this premier is ignored, as the administrators simply dispose of the crisis in original ways. Given this situation, the author believes that social media context is the core factor as well as the breakthrough of crisis communication at present.

Looking into social media background may be the solution to not only crisis communication but also other dilemmas in this era. For crisis communication, deep acknowledgment of social media and its impact should be attained, on the base of which a comprehensive crisis response system needs to be built. For other dilemmas, this article will serve as a reminder of the significance of the macro factors, encouraging scholars to grasp the feature of the time before simply searching for answers to specific issues.

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