

Effects of the Online World on Crisis Communication and Crisis Management

As I talk to crisis managers in the United States, Europe, and Asia, the topic that draws the most interest is social media. There is a keen desire to understand the various ways social media and online communication in general influence crisis communication. Because of this interest, online communication is highlighted in this early chapter as well as being incorporated through the remainder of the book. This interest is due in part to the word *revolution*, which is frequently used in reference to online communication and crisis communication. Revolution does capture your attention and sells people on seminars for improving crisis communication, but it is an overstatement. It is more appropriate to think of the Internet as hastening the evolution of crisis communication. Let's start by refining what we mean by the Internet. The Internet is many communication channels, not just one. These channels include websites, discussion boards, blogs, microblogs, chat rooms, Listservs, image sharing, and social networking sites, to name but a few. Internet communication channels emphasize the interactive and interconnected nature of the Internet. For instance, Twitter, a microblogging service, is often hailed for its ability to facilitate interactivity between organizations and stakeholders (Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013). Users can find information, connect with other users, and express their concerns more easily with the Internet than with traditional communication channels. We should remember that people did essentially the same communication tasks prior to the Internet. However, it took more time, effort, and resources to accomplish them.

The Internet is an important evolutionary step in crisis communication, rather than a revolution. Crisis managers still face the same needs to identify warning signs, confront the same basic communication demands, utilize the same concepts, and must enact effective strategic responses. Crisis managers need to identify warning signs in order to prevent crises and/or limit the damage from an emerging crisis. What has changed is how the information is collected and, in some cases, how that information

is processed. Crisis managers are faced with the demand to create a quick and accurate response. What has changed is what constitutes “quick” and how that initial response is delivered. Crisis management plans (CMPs) and crisis teams still make up the heart of the crisis management effort. What has changed is how CMPs are stored and accessed and how team members interact with one another (see Chapters 5 and 6). Crisis managers must weight key crisis factors and devise an appropriate and effective crisis response. What has changed are the ways of identifying critical crisis information and how their messages are delivered. As early as 2001, it was estimated that 25% of all crises involved the Internet (Herbst, 2001). This chapter highlights key ways in which the Internet is affecting crisis communication and crisis management. Many of these will be developed further in later chapters.

Let’s begin with a short discussion of the online environment, which provides the context for appreciating this environment’s effects on crisis communication. I’ll then highlight the effects of social media on crisis communication organized by the three phases of crisis management.

THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT: MULTIPLE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

We cannot have a discussion about the Internet’s effects on crisis communication and management without first discussing the online environment itself. This will be a very basic discussion given that crisis, not the online environment, is the focus of this book. Organizations entered the online world, and thus created an online presence, with the use of web pages. Taylor and Kent (2007) led the initial research investigating whether and how websites were used in a crisis. They observed how important it was to incorporate web sites into crisis communication efforts as more and more stakeholders were utilizing this channel during a crisis (Taylor & Perry, 2005). Practitioners have embraced this advice, though many organizations still make no mention of a crisis on their websites. Websites, however, were just the beginning of the online communication tools that would shape current crisis communication and management thinking.

Websites generally reflect Web 1.0 rather than Web 2.0. Web 2.0 refers to applications that promote user-generated content, sharing of that content, and collaboration to create content. Web 2.0 promotes interaction and allows users to create web content (O’Reilly, 2005). Corporate websites primarily distribute content (Web 1.0) rather than promote the creation and sharing of content. Web 2.0 was the foundation for social media. Social media is a collection of online technologies that allow users to share insights, experiences, and opinions with one another. The sharing can be in the form of text, audio, video, or multimedia (Safko & Brake, 2009). Social media is responsible for the growing link between crisis communication/management and the online world. Social media is an evolutionary stimulus because users, not organizations or the traditional news media, now control the creation and distribution of information. Users bypass the traditional information gatekeepers. It is important to refine our understanding of social media before exploring its effects on crisis communication/management.

Social media is a collection of online communication channels/tools that share five common characteristics: (1) participation: anyone can create and give feedback on content; (2) openness: most social media permits people to post content and feedback; (3) conversation: it facilitates two-way interaction; (4) communities: groups with similar interests can form quickly; and (5) connectedness: there is heavy use of links to other content (Voit, n.d.). Note how interactivity is the key factor connecting the five characteristics. These characteristics are self-explanatory, but community warrants further attention. One of the original qualities of the Internet that attracted public relations people was the way online communities formed. *Online communities* can be defined as groups of people with similar goals or interests that connect with one another and exchange information using web tools (Owyang, 2007). Social media has increased the speed and ease with which online communities form. Online communities can be collections of important stakeholders for an organization. The comments and actions of these communities, in turn, can have a significant effect on an organization. Negative online comments can threaten valuable reputational assets (Oneupweb, 2007). That potential to affect organizations is what makes online communities and social media so important to crisis communication/management. An example will help to illustrate the point.

On May 6, 2010, Pampers, a product of Procter & Gamble, issued a news release with the title *Pampers Calls Rumors Completely False*. Here is an excerpt from the news release that summarizes the situation:

Jodi Allen, Vice President for Pampers, said, "For a number of weeks, Pampers has been a subject of growing but completely false rumors fueled by social media that its new Dry Max diaper causes rashes and other skin irritations. These rumors are being perpetuated by a small number of parents, some of whom are unhappy that we replaced our older Cruisers and Swaddlers products while others support competitive products and the use of cloth diapers. Some have specifically sought to promote the myth that our product causes "chemical burns." We have comprehensively and thoroughly investigated these and other claims and have found no evidence whatsoever that the reported conditions were in any way caused by materials in our product. Independent physicians, highly respected in the field, have analyzed our data and have confirmed our conclusions." (para. 1)

Parents were making online comments that Pampers' new version of its product was harming infants. That is a serious charge for a company trying to sell diapers to parents. Parents do not want to buy a product that will hurt their children. Social media (e.g., blogs, microblogs, social networking sites) were the route for spreading the "rumor." The popular social networking site Facebook is a prime example of social media fanning the rumor. A discussion thread on a Pampers page appeared, claiming that Pampers created severe diaper rash, which even included blistering. The Facebook page had over 10,000 members, many of whom were parents who posted their concerns and experiences on the page. Pampers has its own Facebook page with over 100,000 fans, and even that page had parents posting stories of bad reactions to new Pampers under the discussion heading

“New Pampers are HORRIBLE!” (the discussion thread is no longer available online). Pampers responded to those concerns. Here is an exchange (with the names changed):

- Debbie: I know I’m going to get a lot of flak for this, but oh well. I want to let people know my experience.
- I’ve been using Pampers on my daughter since she was born in Oct. 08. I never had a problem with them and LOVED them. The softness of them was what made me use them at first. Then it was the absorbancy. My daughter has sensitive skin and everything else made her breakout besides Pampers and Huggies. And I didn’t like Huggies because of the stiffness.
- When the new Pampers came out Sarah was wearing the Cruisers and I had no clue they changed. I bought a box and it looked EXACTLY the same as the ones I was buying before. When we opened the box to start using them we noticed right away that they were different. They were REALLY thin and didn’t feel as soft, but I tried them anyway.
- Sarah started getting rashes RIGHT away. And when I say rashes, I mean REALLY BAD rashes. I change her right when I notice she’s gone. Usually a minute or two after she’s gone because I know her cues. Her rashes were blistering and bleeding. And when I’d get them to clear up they’d come right back. I started asking around and found out a LOT of people were having the same problem with their children.
- We switched over to Huggies Little Movers and Huggies Overnight and we haven’t had rashes like that since.
- To the pampers people: You REALLY need to look into this. This is NOT an isolated problem. It’s happening to a LOT of parents.
- Pampers: Hi Debbie. You definitely won’t get flak from us for sharing your experience. We appreciate it, but I’m just so sorry to hear about Sarah’s rashes, as well as Maria’s children and Bridget’s baby.
- Please do understand that we thoroughly evaluate our diapers to ensure they are safe and gentle on your little one’s skin. Although I’ll be passing this information along to our Health & Safety Division, I really hope that you, Bridget, and Maria get in touch with us directly at 1-866-586-5654. We’re available M–F, 9–6, EST.
- Shelley—I’ll be sure to share your feedback with our Quality Control Team. We’d love you to give them another try since you had trouble with the tabs. Just get in touch with us at the same number and we can offer some help.

Pampers was reaching out to people expressing their concerns via social media. Pampers even held a summit with four influential “mommy bloggers,” women who blog about

consumer products intended for family use: Renee Bigner, Kate Marsh Lord, Tiffany Snedaker, and Stephanie Manner Wagner. The summit was a chance for Pampers and independent experts to provide information about the situation and to dispel the rumor. The four bloggers agreed that after the meeting they had greater confidence in the diapers (Sewell, 2010). Managers do consider negative information appearing in social media as legitimate threats to the reputations of the organizations, the reputation of products, and the sales of those products. In other words, social media can be a warning sign for a problem that has the opportunity to grow into a full-scale crisis.

Social media is a broad term that covers a variety of different online communication tools. Developing a comprehensive list of social media is like trying to count sand on the beach. New tools keep emerging, so you cannot have a complete and comprehensive list. But we can construct a system for categorizing the various types of social media. A category system is functional for crisis communication. By understanding how the different categories can be used in crisis communication, crisis managers can understand how to use any of the individual tools within the category. There are many different ways to categorize social media. Table 2.1 presents a synthesis of various lists along with definitions of the categories. True to the interconnected nature of the Internet, the categories are often used in combination with one another, making it appear as though they overlap. However, each category does have distinctive features that separate it from the others. They all possess the basic ability to share information and opinions with other users.

Table 2.1 Social Media Categories

Social networks	Individual websites from which people share content and communicate with friends (Examples: Facebook, MySpace, Bebo)
Blogs	Online journals where people post content and others can comment on it
Wikis	Web pages where people work together to create and edit content (Example: Wikipedia)
Podcasts	Audio and video content created and distributed through a subscription-based service (Example: The Executive Lounge with Andrew Coffey)
Forums	Online discussions revolving around specific interests and topics
Content communities	Places where people organize themselves around specific content that they create and comment on (Examples: YouTube, Flickr)
Microblogs	Sites on which people share small amounts of information through posts (Example: Twitter)
Aggregators	Tools that collect content (e.g., news stories, blogs) from different sites in one site; content is frequently ranked by popularity and can include comments from users (Example: Reddit or Popurls)
Social bookmarking	Tool with which people share and rate content they have found online (Example: Delicious)

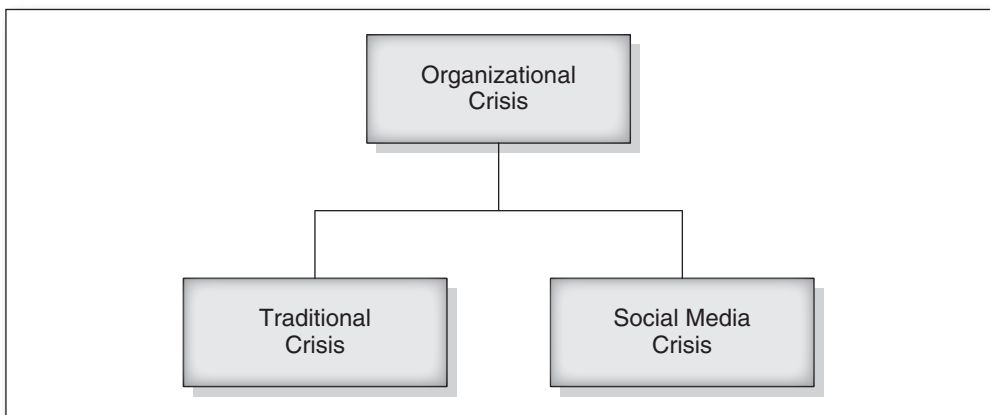
It is important to realize that social media is dominated by user-created content. This means stakeholders are accustomed to being in control. It follows that basic ideas from traditional media relations do not and should not be applied. It is easy to find online rants about how public relations people pitch bloggers just like they pitch the traditional news media. Social media is about interaction and control, not being fed information. I make this point because crisis communicators must be savvy if they are to use social media strategically. Keep in mind that the primary value of social media is *listening* to what stakeholders are saying, not in sending them information, and providing *access* to information when stakeholders might need it. Listening and access will be used to illustrate the potential value of social media to crisis managers by coupling it with the steps of crisis management.

Refining the Conceptualization of Crisis

In Chapter 1, I defined the term *crisis*. I noted that when the book uses this term, it is referring to organizational crises. With the advent of consumer-generated content delivered via social media, it is important to refine how we conceptualize crisis. Figure 2.1 illustrates how an organizational crisis can be divided into two larger categories, traditional and social media crises. Traditional crises focus more on issues of public safety and welfare along with disruptions of organizational operations. I call this traditional because the development of crisis management was designed around these vary types of crises. We will return to the discussion of traditional crises in Chapter 5.

Social media crises can be defined as events that can harm an organization and arise in or are amplified by social media (Owyang, 2011). Social media crises focus more on reputational concerns. Conway, Ward, Lewis, and Bernhardt (2007) labeled the reputational threats from stakeholders *Internet crisis potential*. That does not mean a social media crisis may not have a public safety or welfare component. However, the bulk of social media crises concerns reputation. Similarly, traditional crises will have a reputational aspect but

Figure 2.1 Traditional and Social Media Crises



primarily are about public safety and welfare. Reputational concerns are important because an organizational reputation is a valued asset that must be cultivated and protected.

Even the concept of social media crisis is too broad. There are different types of social media crises. One way to differentiate social media crises is by the origin of the crisis. The origin of the crisis is important to understand because it helps to determine the threat posed by the crisis and best options for responding to the crisis. Figure 2.2 provides two different views of organizing social crises by source of the crisis. In most cases, social media crises are really paracrises but have the potential to become actual crises.

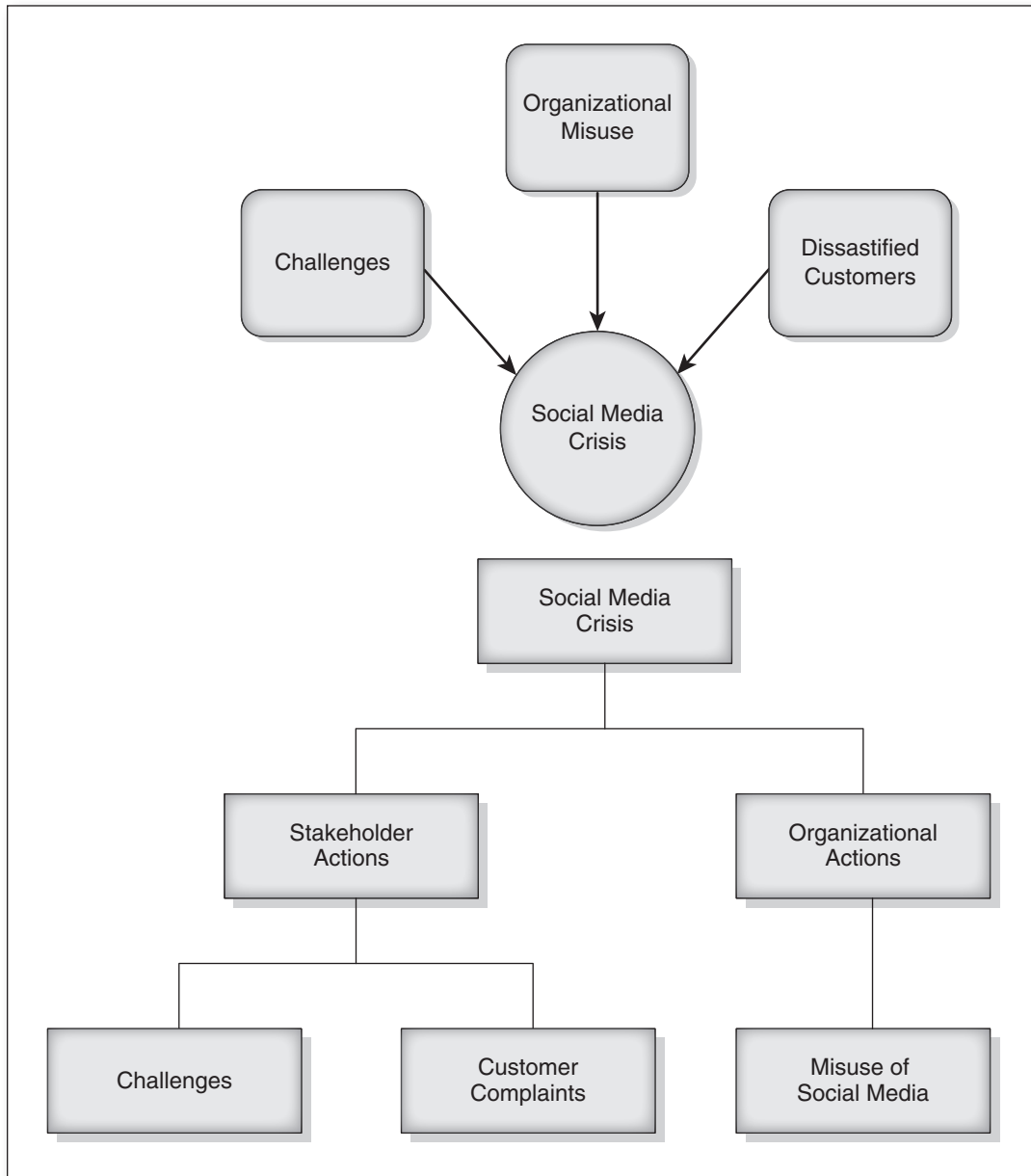
An organizational misuse social media crisis is when an organization violates the norms of behavior in a particular social media channel. An example is when Gap used the hashtag #Sandy to encourage online shopping during Super Storm Sandy. Another is when an employee at the Red Cross talked about drinking beer with the hashtag #gettnngslizzerd. The most effective response is to apologize for the error and, if possible, indicate how it will not happen again. It is also good to have a sense of humor when the mistake seems unintentional. For instance, the Red Cross tweeted, "We've deleted the rogue tweet but rest assured the Red Cross is sober and we've confiscated the keys." Donations to the Red Cross went up after the incident (Nason, 2011). An organizational misuse social media crisis can escalate when the "mistake" is considered intentional and a blatant violation of ethical practices.

Dissatisfied customer social media crises are really a customer relations problem rather than a crisis. Many companies now use social media as part of their customer service. Dissatisfied customers may emerge spontaneously or be part of an organized effort. When McDonald's asked people to use the hashtag #McDStories to share their fond memories of McDonald's, many people used the hashtag to tell their horror stories instead. McDonald's is an example of spontaneous outpouring of customer dissatisfaction. During Christmas of 2012, Starbucks paid to sponsor the projection screen at the temporary skating rink at the Natural History Museum in London. The screen projected tweets about Starbucks with the hashtag #SpreadTheCheer. A group called UK Uncut used the hashtag to express their displeasure at the exceedingly low amount Starbucks pays in UK taxes. To make matter worse, the filter designed to prevent obscene tweets from appearing failed, exposing the children to some rather off-color language (Morse, 2012). Starbucks is an example of an organized effort and also relates to the final category of social media crises: challenges. The response is to work to resolve the complaint—engage in effective customer services practices. A dissatisfied customer social media crisis could be an early warning of a product harm situation (a traditional crisis) if customers are reporting similar product failures or problems.

Challenges are when stakeholders perceive that an organization's behaviors and/or policies are inappropriate or irresponsible (Lerbinger, 1997). The core of the challenge is that stakeholders argue that the organization is acting irresponsibly. Those charges can erode reputations. Reputations are built on meeting stakeholder expectations (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). Hence, violating stakeholder expectations harms reputations (Finet, 1994). Reputations are valued organizational assets that managers seek to build rather than damage (Davies, Chun, da Silva, & Roper, 2003). The challenge is a negative reflection on the organization that serves to tarnish its reputation.

Obviously the notion of challenge is very vague. Coombs (2010c) offers a more precise view of challenges by identifying three types of challenges: (1) organic, (2) expose, and (3) villain. The different challenge types have implications for crisis communication.

Figure 2.2 Source and Types of Social Media Crises



The nature of the challenge impacts the how the reputation is affected and how best to respond to the challenge. An organic challenge results from an organization losing touch

with changes in stakeholder values and interests. Over time, stakeholder values and beliefs can change. In turn, stakeholders expect organizations to reflect those new values and beliefs. An excellent example of the shift in values and beliefs is the concern stakeholders have for the treatment of workers in the garment industry supply chain. If organizational behaviors do not change to mirror those of the stakeholders, stakeholders will perceive the organization as violating their expectations. The misalignment of expectations can be a natural process because organizations often lag behind stakeholder expectations (value and belief changes). Consider how Nike was targeted for sweatshop abuses among suppliers when stakeholder values about workers in the supply chain shifted. An organic challenge seeks to bring the misalignment to the attention of management.

An expose challenge arises when stakeholders prove an organization's words are inconsistent with its actions. An example would be charges of "greenwashing" when an organization claims to be environmentally friendly while devoting little time or resources to improving the environment. Stakeholders call managers for their overstatement of action on social or environmental concerns with an expose challenge. An expose challenge creates the impression of organizational malice. Managers seem to be purposefully overstating the organization's social and environmental performance. Managers seem to be pretending to meet stakeholder expectations, and that is more harmful to a reputation than simply not recognizing that an expectation exists.

The villain challenge is one in a series of arguments between an organization and a specific group of stakeholders. The stakeholders are generally professional activist groups that have a long-standing dispute with an organization. The villain challenge is simply one more battle in the larger war. The stakeholders hope to portray the organization as a villain that needs to reform its evil ways. To those outside this personal war, the villain crisis may seem like noise and be dismissed as "those two going at it again" (Coombs, 2010c).

Managers have four strategies that can be used in response to challenges: (1) refutation, (2) repression, (3) reform, and (4) repentance. These strategies are based on how institutions typically respond to attempts to influence their decision-making processes (Bowers, Ochs, & Jensen, 1993). The refutation strategy attempts to invalidate the challenge. One option is to prove the organization is actually meeting stakeholder expectations. Managers must provide evidence to demonstrate they are meeting expectations but stakeholders were simply unaware of their actions. Another option is to question the validity of the expectations. Managers argue that the expectation is not widely shared and not one that the organization should seek to meet. The position is that the expectation can be ignored because it is only relevant to a small number of stakeholders. This option requires managers to show how these stakeholders are out of step with the majority of their stakeholders. Refutation can increase damage from a challenge if stakeholders can prove the organization is lying about meeting the expectations or that others do not care about the expectations—then an expose challenge occurs. However, there are times when refutation is appropriate because the challenge is wrong or reflects the views of only a very limited number of stakeholders (the expectation is illegitimate). For instance, a villain challenge can be characterized as being of concern only to the attacking small stakeholder group proposing the challenge.

The repression strategy seeks to prevent stakeholders from making others aware of their challenge. Lawsuits and other forms of intimidation can be used in attempts to silence challengers (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Repression is a dangerous option because

it precludes the free exchange of ideas and creates the impression of censorship. Other stakeholders may react negatively to the repression strategy, creating a backlash against the organization.

The reform strategy acknowledges there is a violation of expectations and explains how the organization is trying to meet those expectations. Managers will legitimize stakeholder expectations and seek to alter the organization's behaviors to reflect these expectations. The reform strategy fits well with an organic challenge. The response reflects the organization's lag in understanding and responding to stakeholder expectations.

The repentance strategy is when management admits its claims were exaggerated and is working to meet the expectations the organization had already claimed to be meeting. The repentance strategy fits with the expose challenge. The key element of repentance is admitting to the wrongdoing. However, this admission can make matters worse before making them better. Stakeholders can be angered by the organization's initial deception (P. H. Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004). Repentance is a long-term investment. It will take time for the organization to prove it is actually meeting expectations and not just talking a good game (N. Smith, 2008).

Challenges are unique and complex social crises. Responses to a challenge crisis can be more varied than any of the other crisis types to be discussed in Chapter 5. Managers have a variety of response options, but must carefully assess the nature of the challenge before selecting a response strategy. Organic, expose, and villain challenges have unique features that make different response strategies more or less effective.

EFFECTS ON CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Social media has a variety of effects on crisis communication. The three stages of crisis management provide a useful framework for organizing the discussion of these effects. This section reviews key effects that will be discussed in later chapters.

Precrisis

Listening is what scanning for crisis warning signs is all about. Social media provides an opportunity for finding warning signs generated by stakeholders. Blogs, microblogs, content communities, social networks, forums, aggregators, and social bookmarking are all excellent scanning tools for crisis managers. The challenge is wading through the vast amounts of information to locate emerging trends that appear ready to develop into crises, a point we will return to in Chapter 4. Not every online statement or video is really a potential crisis. However, the nature of the Internet is that ideas from seemingly unimportant sources can spread rapidly, thereby creating the potential for a crisis. This concern is rooted in the big-seed approach to viral messages.

The big-seed approach is used in contrast to the small-seed notion of how ideas spread on the Internet—how a message becomes viral. The small-seed concept argues that only a few influential people need to spread the message for an idea to emerge online (Thompson, 2008). Duncan Watts, a network researcher at Yahoo, has used computer modeling to show

that average people are the most likely source for a successful viral message. In the big-seed approach, a large number of people (seeds) are targeted with the initial message. There is a mass effort to reach a broad spectrum of the target audience rather than identifying a few influentials. Watts and Peretti (2007) argue that any individual from the mass audience can create the viral spread of a message. Hence, crisis managers cannot just monitor what influential stakeholders are saying but must be attuned to a wide array of stakeholders. It is helpful at this point to introduce the idea of a paracrisis.

The term *para* means resembling or protection from something. A paracrisis resembles a crisis because it threatens the organization's reputation and related assets. However, a paracrisis would not require the activation of the crisis team and does not disrupt the organization. Still, a paracrisis warrants attention because neglect or mismanagement could create an actual crisis. A paracrisis is a specific type of crisis warning sign. It mimics a crisis itself. Motrin's offensive ad to mothers is an example of a paracrisis. In 2008, Motrin created an edgy ad that noted how mothers have back pain from using sling-type baby carriers. The ad was in print and online in video form. Many mothers were offended by it and took to social media to express their outrage. Twitter was a popular location for mothers to attack Motrin. There was even a 9-minute YouTube video featuring the Twitter complaints. The ad appeared online on a Saturday morning. The social media criticism stormed Twitter by Saturday evening. On the following Monday, McNeil Consumer Healthcare, the maker of Motrin, removed the ad from the Internet and replaced it with an apology (Tsouderos, 2008). McNeil Consumer Healthcare did not see any disruption in the production or sale of Motrin. There was minor damage to the corporate and product reputation that had the potential to escalate if the paracrisis was not handled swiftly and effectively. By removing the ad and apologizing, McNeil Consumer Healthcare managed the paracrisis, thereby defusing a potential crisis.

Paracrises that emerge in social media are unique crisis warning signs because they appear in full view of stakeholders. Typically, crisis prevention efforts are invisible to stakeholders. For instance, organizations revise safety procedures or replace a dangerous chemical to reduce the threat of hazardous chemical releases. Visibility is what gives a paracrisis its impact. The public appearance of the paracrisis demands public management. Managers must explain to all stakeholders what is being done to address the concern or why they are choosing to ignore it. The paracrisis blurs the line between precrisis and crisis response because addressing the paracrisis can appear to be a crisis response rather than preventative action. The key point here is that social media increases the visibility and number of paracrises because the Internet can highlight the stakeholder concerns that drive paracrises. As one white paper on social media and crisis recommended, "never ignore conflict/crisis on social media" ("Crisis Management for Social Media," n.d., p. 4; IR Insight, 2012).

Crisis Response

It is very easy to find an online webinar or physical seminar where "experts" will tell you how to use the online environment to manage a crisis. The "selling" of online crisis communication creates the illusion that traditional media no longer matter. In fact, overusing

online crisis communication is a dangerous delusion. Media selection must be driven by your target audience. Crisis managers select communication channels that effectively and efficiently reach the desired target audience. If online channels are relevant to your stakeholders during a crisis, then add online channels to the mix. However, crisis managers must integrate the online and traditional communication channels into a seamless and consistent crisis response (Wehr, 2007). Above all, crisis managers must use online channels strategically rather than just because someone said they should (Oneupweb, 2007).

I argue that there are four basic rules when using online crisis communication channels: (1) be present, (2) be where the action is, (3) be there before the crisis, and (4) be polite. *Be present* means that crisis managers should not hide from the online world. Stakeholders, including the news media, will look to the corporate website and existing social media activities of an organization for information. If the crisis is never mentioned in the organization's online communication, the absence will be noticeable. The organization will be criticized for being silent and miss the opportunity to present its interpretation of the crisis. Chapter 8 will return to the importance of presenting the organization's side of the crisis.

Be where the action is refers to using the online origins of the crisis as one location for the crisis response messages. If the crisis began as a YouTube video, then YouTube should be one of the places where the crisis response appears. Domino's Pizza followed that advice when its CEO posted an apology on YouTube after a disgusting video of Domino's employees supposedly tampering with food was posted on YouTube. If the crisis breaks on Facebook, then the organization's Facebook page should address the crisis. Will the CEO's message about the crisis be popular or viewed as much as the crisis-inducing video? Will the organization have as many favorable comments as its critics do? The answer is clearly "no," but placing the message in the source channel increases the likelihood of people encountering your message along with the crisis-inducing message.

Be there before the crisis means that implementing a social media push after a crisis is less effective than if the organization was already utilizing social media. Social networking sites, blogs, and microblogs are most effective when there are followers—people viewing the content regularly. Having an existing presence builds credibility and authenticity for your crisis messages. When American Airlines and Southwest Airlines had to ground planes for safety inspections, both used blogs to discuss the problem. Prior to the crisis, Southwest had a popular blog called Nuts About Southwest. American had no blog. Southwest used its blog to help inform passengers and answer their questions. There were quickly over 140 responses after the first crisis post by Southwest. When American started a blog after the crisis, stakeholders did not know about it and virtually no one accessed it. American did nothing to promote the blog, including no link from its corporate website. Eventually American dropped the blog. American's experience demonstrates that arriving late to the social media game is problematic (Holtz, 2007). However, there is still value in starting to use social media after a crisis because of the need to be where the action is. Crisis managers must never forget the strategic aspect of the crisis response (Martine, 2007). The nature of the crisis plays a critical role in strategic choices about the selection of social media options to deliver a crisis response, a point developed in Chapter 8.

Be polite is the final point but is the most important when communicating via social media. Organizations should never be rude even if a stakeholder is trying to provoke them in

social media. “Trolls” purposefully try to rile an organization, while angry stakeholders may post “mean” comments about an organization. Being subject to harsh criticism is part of the price for being in social media. Rude responses will escalate and make the situation worse. Another part of being polite is following the rules of social media, a point reinforced by the earlier discussion of organizational misuse social media crises. To be effective, crisis communication must conform to rules of whatever social media channel it is using (Agnes, 2012).

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Burger King Hack

You are a corporate communication specialist at Burger King with responsibility for social media efforts. On a Monday at 11:00 a.m. you notice a problem with the company’s Twitter account. The Burger King logo has been replaced by the McDonald’s logo. There is a tweet that claims Burger King has been sold to McDonald’s. A number of rather obscene and offensive tweets then appear under @BurgerKing. They are clearly not the type of messages you want associated with your brand. You realize your Twitter account has been hacked.

1. Is this a crisis or a paracrisis? What leads you to that conclusion?
2. What would you do next to try to prevent reputational damage from this hack?
3. Who would you need to contact to complete the actions you identified in your answer to Question 2?

Postcrisis

Stakeholders may still require follow-up information and updates after the crisis is officially over. Social media provide another channel for delivering the updates and addressing specific follow-up questions stakeholders may have. Crisis managers will need to determine how long to keep special crisis web pages or blogs operational. One criterion would be to decommission such sites when interest wanes. Managers may want to move past the special crisis pages and blogs as another sign that the crisis is over. That is when social media can be valuable. Microblogs, such as Twitter, provide excellent outlets for updates and to answer lingering questions. If people begin following the organization during the crisis, the microblog can post updates that will reach interested stakeholders. Moreover, microblogs have the capacity to answer questions if the answer is, in the case of Twitter, 140 characters or less. Regular corporate blogs and social network pages provide opportunities for posting updates and responding to questions, too. Social media provides channels for reaching stakeholders who are still looking to engage the organization about crisis issues in the postcrisis phase, a point covered in Chapter 9.

CONCLUSION

This chapter began by noting that the Internet is speeding, rather than revolutionizing, the evolution of crisis communication. I argue for evolution because the Internet, especially social media, helps crisis managers execute existing communication-related tasks rather than creating the need for entirely new ones. But crisis managers would be engaging in malpractice if they did not integrate social media into their activities. For instance, social media places a greater demand on scanning while providing more tools for accomplishing the task. Social media is important enough to crisis communication to warrant a separate chapter to highlight its impact. Social media is both a benefit and a liability to crisis communicators (Kerkhof, Shultz, & Utz, 2011; Mei, Bansal, & Pang, 2010). As noted earlier, later chapters will extend the ways that social media is insinuating itself into crisis communication throughout the entire crisis management process.

CRISIS LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES: SENSE MAKING

Crisis leaders engage in sense making when they find and interpret warning signs for a crisis. "Seeing" crisis warning signs is always easy after the crisis occurs. The real skill is noticing warning signs before the crisis occurs. Crisis leaders are able to locate warning signs, understand what they mean, and decide what they should do to reduce the likelihood of a crisis occurring (James & Wooten, 2010). Sense making is an underlying theme in Chapter 2. Social media are invaluable sources of crisis warning signs for modern organizations. Paracrises are essentially warning signs. Chapter 3 will return the topic of identifying potential crisis warning signs.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is it important to understand that online and social media really consists of multiple channels and not one communication channel?
2. Which do you find more appealing and why, the small-seed or large-seed approach?
3. What do you think makes word of mouth so powerful?
4. What are the dangers associated with using any social media?
5. What if any value is there in differentiating between crises and paracrises?
6. Besides the cases listed in this chapter, what other evidence can you find that social media is affecting crisis communication?
7. Which social media do you use? Do you think organizations could use it to reach you during a crisis? Why or why not?
8. Does it make sense to differentiate between traditional and social media crises? Why or why not?