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Research in brief

Crisis managers losing control of the message: A pilot study of the Virginia Tech shooting☆

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ABSTRACT

This pilot study examined the role citizen generated content plays in the coverage of crisis situations and discusses implications for public relations practitioners who must respond to this type of coverage. A content analysis of newspapers and the websites of cable and broadcast news networks revealed reporters were more likely to use citizen generated content during the first stage of the crisis and were more likely to use non-official technology sources, or citizen generated content, than official technology sources such as web-based news releases and official statements.

Controlling the flow of information in the event of a crisis is paramount to successfully managing a crisis. In today's media climate, crisis managers are often confronted with two major issues: (1) the media's use of non-official sources and (2) the media's use of technology to gather information from these non-official sources. The latter technique can be referred to as citizen generated content.

Because of social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter, ordinary citizens have become important players in the coverage of crises. Additionally, many mainstream news outlets also have embraced social media. CNN's I-Report, Fox News Channel's U-Report, among others, encourage ordinary citizens to upload pictures, stories and videos to be aired on television and cable and broadcast news websites (Potter, 2007).

Examples of social media's impact on crisis reporting abound. When singer Jennifer Hudson's family was murdered the media turned to the alleged perpetrator's MySpace page to learn more about him. When US Airways Flight 1549 landed safely in the Hudson River, the first pictures of the crash were posted on Twitter. When terrorists took over parts of Mumbai, victims tweeted to update their friends, families and the world about what was happening to them.

Research on citizen generated content is limited. It has been described as a means of bypassing traditional gatekeepers which allows viewers to witness events that would otherwise be inaccessible to them or the media (Cooper, 2007; Gillmor, 2004). Furthermore, it helps bypass the journalist who may be corrupted or biased by either state or private interests (Chouliaraki, 2008). However, the authors of this study argue that mainstream media has embraced citizen generated content as evidenced by their encouragement of citizens to submit photographs, videos and comments for public broadcast as well as their active involvement on social media websites like Facebook, MySpace and Twitter. The media refuses to be bypassed and instead is going to where the citizen journalists are to find news. As Hannah (2009) stated, "...in the case of crises, user-generated media is just as likely to inform traditional media as vice versa."

☆ A complete version of this study is available by request from the corresponding author.

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One of the first crises to utilize citizen generated content occurred on April 16, 2007 when a gunman opened fire on the campus of Virginia Tech University and killed 32 students before killing himself. Perhaps one of the most memorable images of the tragedy was cell phone video shot by Virginia Tech graduate student Jamal Albarghouti and sent to CNN. The video showed armed police surrounding a campus building as gunfire rang in the background. A CNN executive producer told *Broadcasting & Cable*, "The primary way to obtain the first picture and early witness accounts were from participant observations and not traditional news organizations" (Becker, 2007, p. 16). Within two days of the shootings, CNN had received well over 100 videos and photographs through I-Report. In addition, social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace aided reporters in gathering facts about victims.

Therefore, it appears that in the pursuit of information, reporters covering the Virginia Tech shootings utilized citizen generated content to cover the story. The question is, to what extent was citizen generated content used and what does its use imply for those who manage crises? This study is important because it is one of the first to discuss implications for public relations practitioners who must deal with the media's use of citizen generated content during a crisis.

1. Methodology

The study utilized a content analysis to investigate the types of sources – official, non-official, and new technology, non-new technology sources – used in media coverage of the Virginia Tech shootings. Thus, the unit of analysis was the source. Sources were identified from three newspapers and the websites of four cable and broadcast news networks. The sample was collected in March 2008 and included three national newspapers – *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today* – and four television news websites – *ABCnews.com*, *CBSnews.com*, *CNN.com*, and *FoxNews.com*. The timeline for the study was from Monday, April 16, 2007 – the day of the shootings – to Monday, April 23, 2007 – the day classes resumed at Virginia Tech University.

A source was defined as any person or entity that is directly quoted or attributed as a source in the text of the news article. A total of 30 newspaper articles and 102 articles from the websites of cable and broadcast networks were accessed. From these articles, a total of 1161 sources were analyzed.

Sources were categorized into one of four categories: official/non-technology; non-official/non-technology; official/technology; and non-official/technology. Official sources were defined as government officials and spokespeople associated with government entities. Technology sources were defined as the newest forms of technology used to communicate words and images such as websites, blogs, and cell phone videos and photographs.

Official/non-technology sources were defined as individuals tied to local, state, or federal government agencies or entities, including mayors and official university spokespersons. Official/technology sources included the websites of the above mentioned sources. Non-official/non-technology sources included individuals not tied to any government-owned or government sponsored entity. This category included "man-on-the-street" interviews with students, community members, and eyewitness accounts that were obtained in a traditional manner. Non-official/technology sources included stories that attributed any type of new technology or media as providing the source of the information, such as cell phone video, social networking websites and citizen journalism ventures such as I-Report, etc. Sources falling into this category were classified as citizen generated content.

Two coders were trained to identify types of sources used within the news articles. To check for intercoder reliability, the authors randomly selected 16 articles, or just over 10% of the sample, for the coders to review. The intercoder reliability test on the coding sheet as described above produced a coefficient of .86, which exceeded .70, the minimum requirement for reliability (Holsti, 1969).

2. Results

The final sample for analysis included 1161 sources. An analysis revealed a total of 320 official/non-technology sources; 30 official/technology sources; 735 non-official/non-technology sources; and 76 non-official/technology sources.

RQ1: To what extent did reporters use citizen generated content in their coverage of the Virginia Tech shootings? Results revealed that of the 1161 sources identified, 76 fell into the non-official/technology category, or citizen generated content. Therefore, 6.5% of all sources identified in the study were coded as citizen generated content.

RQ2: Were reporters covering the Virginia Tech shootings more likely to use citizen generated content during the beginning stage of the crisis? Results revealed that of the 76 sources coded as citizen generated content in the study, 49 were used during the first 2 days of the crisis. Therefore, reporters were more likely to use citizen generated content during the first stage of the crisis, compared to the latter stage (64% v. 36%).

RQ3: Was there a difference in the amount of citizen generated content used by newspapers compared to cable and broadcast news websites? Results revealed that of the 76 sources coded as citizen generated content, 68 sources were used by cable and broadcast news websites and 8 were used by newspapers. Therefore, cable and broadcast news websites were much more likely to use citizen generated content than newspapers (89% v. 11%).

RQ4: Overall, did reporters utilize more official or non-official sources during coverage of the Virginia Tech shootings? Results revealed that of the 1161 sources coded in the study, 350 were coded as official sources and 811 were coded as non-official sources. Therefore, reporters were much more likely to use non-official sources than official sources (70% v. 30%).

RQ5: Were more official technology sources, such as statements and news releases from organizational websites, or non-official technology sources (citizen generated content) used during coverage of the Virginia Tech shootings? Results revealed that of the 106 technology sources used by reporters in the study, 30 were coded as official technology sources and 76 were coded as non-official technology sources, or citizen generated content. Therefore, reporters were more likely to use non-official technology sources, or citizen generated content, than official technology sources, such as statements and news releases from organizational websites (72% v. 28%).

3. Discussion

Results revealed that a small portion of media analyzed for the study, 6.5%, used citizen generated content in their coverage of the shootings. While not overwhelming, the results demonstrate that media is using citizen generated content in their coverage of crises. Also, since the shootings occurred in 2007, social media use by both citizens and mainstream media has increased dramatically; therefore, an examination of a more recent crisis would likely generate different results.

Results showed that reporters were more likely to use citizen generated content during the first stage of the crisis, compared to the latter stage (64% v. 36%). This suggests that public relations practitioners must react instantly, as soon as a crisis breaks, in order to gain control of the message.

Additionally, results revealed that cable and broadcast news websites were much more likely to use citizen generated content than newspapers (89% v. 11%). This finding makes intuitive since; it seems natural that websites would be more open to use citizen generated content than newspapers. However, the results might also be indicative of the sample.

Results revealed that of the 1161 sources coded in the study, 350 were coded as official sources and 811 were coded as non-official sources. Reporters were much more likely to use non-official sources than official sources overall (70% v. 30%). Therefore, it appears that with or without social media, public relations managers must figure out how to manage crisis situations and counter what is being said by non-official sources.

The mainstream media's use of social media to access those non-official sources means public relations practitioners must learn to respond to the media and public even quicker than before. Because of the nature of the new non-linear web of information, public relations practitioners often find themselves being alerted to a crisis from the media that they are supposed to be informing about it. As Baron and Philbin (2009) observed, "Reporters are extensive users of social media during events. They track Twitter accounts, blogs, YouTube, etc. to gather first-hand accounts and gauge reactions." Obviously crisis managers must go there too in order to successfully manage a crisis.

Finally, the study found that reporters were more likely to use non-official technology sources, or citizen generated content, than official technology sources, such as statements and news releases from organizational websites (72% v. 28%). Reporters are going to where people are and where they are talking, discussing and reporting their own news on social media sites. That means public relations practitioners must go there too. According to Baron and Philbin (2009) ". . .the conversation can affect your organization's perceptions during an event whether you are involved in the conversation or not."

It seems paramount for public relations practitioners to incorporate the use of citizen generated content into any crisis plan. As Baron and Philbin (2009) stated, "Crisis communication planning today must incorporate monitoring, active engagement with relevant sites and the use of emerging forms of social media." The authors go on to say, "When you plan for things that might go wrong, you also need to plan for the role that social media will play and how its involvement will impact your reputation."

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