

Social Media and Crisis Communication

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Editors: Lucinda Austin and Yan Jin

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At a time when an increased amount of reputational issues pop on social media platforms and organizations' constituents are more willing to take them to task publicly, the window for public relations professionals between *getting it right* and *getting it right now* continues to narrow. For many professionals, this calls for a need to reset leadership and constituent expectations while rethinking their approach to issues and crisis planning and online engagement strategy, especially as the two areas continue to merge.

In the book *Social Media and Crisis Communication*, book editors Lucinda Austin, assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Yan Jin, associate professor at the University of Georgia, take a comprehensive look at the state of crisis communications research and the implications that the rise of social media has had on the field. This book couldn't have come at a more important time as the quick and public nature of social media allows anyone with a handle to more easily challenge organizations, causing many public relations professionals to rethink their issues and crisis response strategies and approach to online reputation management.

This is the first book that explores the nexus of social media and

crisis communications research and the new challenges that have emerged. For example, Chapter 2 author Timothy Coombs notes how social media has pushed many prevention and mitigation efforts by organizations in the traditionally private pre-crisis phrase into the public eye (p. 25). This public challenge by a stakeholder, organizational faux pas, or angry customer complaint is referred to as a paracrisis. In Chapter 4, Valentini et al. note that “social media have become the milieu in which many crises are discussed, if not formed” (p. 57).

Structure

The book covers a large body of research and is divided into themed sections, including current and emerging issues of social media and crisis communication, overviews of dominant research streams, emerging theories and frameworks, areas for special consideration, future directions, and applications in specific areas of crisis. Additionally, the editors note that the book addresses some themes throughout different chapters, including the need for more dialogic approaches to crisis communication via social media and measurement of social media engagement in crisis communication response. These recurring ideas show a consistent need for implementation in public relations strategies and potential ideas for future crisis research.

The Dialogic Approach

Because of the interactivity and user-generated nature of social media, multiple chapter authors argue that crisis communication practices need to shift away from typical stakeholder-informing communications toward a more dialogic approach. For example, Valentini et al. say that little research currently exists, but it is needed to understand organizations’ potential use of dialogic communication with stakeholders via social media. They argue that two-way dialogic communication is an important step toward establishing credibility and trust and that stakeholder interactions can also be leveraged to add third-party voices to the mix.

The book also covers the shift over the past decade from organizational approaches to audience-oriented and public-centered approaches for crisis communications, focusing on dialogic communication and stakeholder engagement. In Chapter 19, Guidry and Messner acknowledge that social media opens up two-way communication opportunities, but many organizations have been hesitant to embrace the possibilities and continue to use the platforms ineffectively as a “one-way megaphone” (p. 270).

In Chapter 9, Fraustino and Liu surmise that in crisis scholarship and, to some extent, social media crisis scholarship, a focus on an audience’s perspective is on the rise, placing an emphasis on ethical communications. They add that some gaps remain as the scholarship shifts, including the need to consider publics and outcome measures that aren’t just focused on the organization’s short- and long-term survival, but more so on the social good—the audience response during a crisis as a whole. In Chapter 5, Hung-Baesecke and Bowen add that organizations need to consider the ethics of engaging with stakeholders on social media when planning crisis strategies, including the fact that being “authentic” helps organizations in the long-run (p. 74).

Measurement of Social Media Engagement in Crisis Communication Response

Along the theme of measurable goals, Austin and Jin suggest more research is needed to continue to assess the effectiveness of crisis communications messaging, especially on different social media platforms. In Chapter 3, Goodman, for example, explained that the quality of proactive issues management (monitoring for issues, building and maintaining relationships, and implementing an effective issues-response system) is “usually a direct result of how rigorously those efforts are measured” and how specific goals are defined, especially in the “issues mapping” process (p. 65). In other words, the more you can

show the value, the more support organizational leadership will have for proactive prevention. Conversely, as evidenced by Fraustino and Liu, the value to the organization should not be the only consideration. Ethically, organizations should have a concern for the effectiveness of communications on directing audiences during a crisis, to create not only a good organizational image but also to benefit the public.

Social Media Crisis Communication Models

The book explores the development of different types of crisis communications models, including Coombs' situational crisis communications theory (SCCT), Benoit's image-repair theory, and Cameron and colleagues' contingency theory of strategic conflict management, in conjunction with the role of social media in crisis communications. It also explores the only social-media specific crisis communications model, Austin and Jin's social-mediated crisis communications (SMCC) model.

The authors did a nice job of explaining these models and showing examples of putting them into practice. Austin and Jin identify the need for a focus on developing better theories and frameworks specific to communicating a crisis on social media platforms, instead of attempting to adapt the existing theories. Austin and Jin suggest this approach for future research, citing the need for "prescribing strategic solutions and recommendations for crisis managers who look for science-based insights tailored for a relatively focused and specialized crisis communication arena" (p. 450).

Visual Elements and Social Media Crisis Communication

The book also addresses the visual nature of social media, including the potential benefits of integrating images and graphics into crisis responses. In Chapter 19, Guidry and Messner show how the more visually focused platform Pinterest contributes to pro- and anti-vaccination health communications. Janoske expands on the benefits of

visuals in Chapter 22, writing about how natural disaster images help the public understand and emotionally cope in recovery. She shows how social media allows members of the public to form communities when sharing emergency information and photos during a crisis and how crisis communicators can use these online visual communities to better understand the situation and inform their communications strategies for the publics they serve.

Austin and Jin conclude the book by acknowledging new areas of research opportunities, noting the fact that social media technology is so rapidly changing calls for continued research as crisis communications adjusts to developing platforms.

Recommendation

This is an excellent, informative, and well-researched book with contributions from many well-established authors in both the crisis communications and social media research fields. The book gives a comprehensive overview of the current state of research and offers suggestions for the future as these two areas continue to overlap. It thoroughly covers the emergence of crisis communications theory and its increasingly common intersection with social media, and, I would argue, will serve as a bedrock resource for the next wave of research.

The book is valuable for academics and professional practitioners alike. The variety of examples of organizations and types of crises studied in the “application” section makes it a great tool for public relations practitioners, in particular. At 461 pages, this book is expansive, but its thoughtful organization and high-level approach lend it to easily be used as a textbook for a graduate course on the topic.