

USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN TIMES OF CRISIS HARMFUL OR HELPFUL?

Twitter and Facebook can provide immediate alerts and responses, but also yield misinformation and other potential concerns. *By Ralph Metzner*

It was a phone call every parent dreads.

“Dad, I don’t want you to worry.”

Any parent will recognize this opening as universal code for “Begin. Worrying. Immediately.”

The call came this past January from my daughter, a senior engineering student at Purdue University, and a member of the Class of 2014.

“There’s been a shooting in the next building, but we’re fine,” she said. “We’re in a room with the doors locked, lights out.”

It’s a parent’s worst nightmare. I responded as I would to any crisis touching one of our clients, setting up alerts and social media monitoring, trying to get a complete picture of what was happening and how the situation was evolving. While receiving texts from my daughter, I was simultaneously monitoring Twitter and the Web from 200 miles away. As is often the case, the first reports and photos were conflicting and confusing, leaving me no way to draw any conclusions.

Within little more than an hour, though, messages began to emerge that the immediate danger had been resolved. The facts of the event were that one armed student had entered an engineering lab and killed a teaching assistant before surrendering to authorities.

As a parent, I was left with a strange mix of emotions — relief, fear, anger and great sadness. As a professional, I had first-hand experience with the behavior of social media in a crisis, and many lessons learned to review.

SOCIAL MEDIA IS HERE TO STAY

FEI works with crisis clients to help them understand the role social media plays in crisis management and response. What we have learned from folks involved in community crisis response is a rather grudging acceptance of the presence of social media and the necessity of understanding its role in crisis management. The general opinion seems to be that social media is flawed and troubled, but here to stay, and any stakeholder in crisis communications will need to deal with it.

The situation at Purdue illustrated many of the challenges presented by social media during a crisis. An article from the campus news publication summed up the incident by reporting that students and faculty thought that social media sources such as Twitter and Facebook delivered confusing reports re-

garding the shooting on campus. While the information may have been misleading, one of the benefits of social media was that the Purdue campus and family members were alerted quickly of the situation.

As we work to understand social media’s behavior in a crisis, four essential characteristics of social media emerge as potential problems:

- Speed
- Lack of Differentiation
- Lack of Attribution
- Persistence

Throughout that tragic morning in January on the Purdue campus, these characteristics and challenges played out in real time.

SPEED

In most areas of our lives, we have come to accept that faster communication is better communication. It is difficult to imagine that communication could be much faster than the on-the-scene, “citizen journalist” role of people directly involved in a crisis. Yet, much of the process that makes communication reliable is missing. There is no opportunity to vet or contextualize the first-hand accounts, whether they are in the form of text messages or photos. Certainly, there is no cycle of editing or fact-checking.

If you have ever been present at the scene of a crisis, you are well aware of the overwhelming sense of chaos and confusion that often prevails. The voices of those “on the ground” at these events may be valuable resources, but they need to be considered with care.

Consider photos taken during a crisis. With no ability to place the photos in context or evaluate their meaning, their rapid circulation only contributes to rumors and misunderstanding. For example, one photo that made its way around showed a plainclothes police officer carrying what looked to be rifles and was misidentified by many social media users as the shooter, according to Indiana Public Media.

LACK OF DIFFERENTIATION

There has been a lot of discussion about the nature of a Twitter message and the 140-character constraint. These short messages do not provide an opportunity for depth of discussion or de-

tail. Twitter feeds have another troublesome characteristic in a crisis, which is that they have very little to differentiate them, apart from one's own familiarity with the source.

A message from a major news outlet looks more or less the same as a message from a lone "troll." Under normal circumstances, this might not present a problem, since one would have most likely validated a source before following. However, monitoring Twitter through an aggregator such as TweetDeck, where the volume of messages can be overwhelming, can make it very difficult to evaluate messages based on the validity of the source.

LACK OF ATTRIBUTION

Understanding the source of a message is probably the most important aspect of determining whether the information is credible and useful. Yet, this is perhaps the greatest shortcoming of all messages in the social media channels. There is simply no way to establish the chain of information back to original sources. The ease in which someone can retweet, share or like on social media contributes to the cycle of word-of-mouth speculation. That, combined with the inability to differentiate sources of those messages, has the potential to create some very disruptive confusion.

PERSISTENCE

Social media messages tend to persist through practices such as retweeting on Twitter and sharing on Facebook, or even simply because there is no editorial oversight ensuring that the information is timely and accurate.

This means that a message can be recirculated as "new" for hours, potentially, after it originally finds its way into the public. As these older messages continue to circulate side-by-side with newer messages, which may be contradictory, the potential for confusion grows.

During the Purdue shooting, there was debate throughout the day about the number of shooters involved, even though there were no definitive sources for the information.

The difficulties with social media illustrated by the Purdue shooting serve to highlight the need for caution in determining whether a particular bit of information may be actionable to the degree that a crisis management or communications team might respond directly. Discussing these difficulties, while it may increase our caution, does not in any way suggest that social media should be excluded from a crisis response plan.

At the very least, social media should be monitored by a crisis re-



Purdue University's Twitter alert about January's reported shooting on campus was retweeted more than 1,300 times, leading to countless other related but unofficial updates from Twitter followers throughout the day.

sponse or communications team as a means of understanding what sorts of rumors your community might be experiencing.

A lesson that can be drawn from observing the Purdue shooting would be to include social media monitoring as part of a larger, well-integrated crisis communications plan.

While it is by no means common or considered a "best practice," we have heard from organizations that they believe the publicly-available social networks will meet their communications needs during a time of crisis. The difficulties we have discussed make it clear that relying on social media exclusively for communications during a crisis event is virtually certain to guarantee confusion and uncertainty.

We recommend developing a communications plan that provides reliable and controlled methods of communication to speak with a clear and accurate voice for your organization during a crisis.

Establish social media channels long before they need to be used in a crisis,

and help your stakeholders understand where they can find the definitive reliable information during a crisis.

To the degree that you do elect to use social media as part of your communications plan, do not wait until a crisis occurs to establish your presence. Purdue, for example, had an official Twitter presence, but it wasn't until after the shooter incident that it created a dedicated handle "@PurdueEmergency" that "will post only information related to campus emergencies and will mirror information that is being shared via Purdue's text alert messaging," according to the university.

Channels such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn should be created ahead of time and used on a frequent basis. This is necessary not only to reduce confusion and chaos during the crisis, but also to ensure that your stakeholders are familiar with your social media channels and will be able to find them when needed. Update your Web site to include links to these channels. In the event of a crisis, you can create a placeholder on your home page to provide updated information and list the hashtags to be used when communicating during the crisis.

With careful planning and diligence, social media can become a powerful tool in your overall crisis planning array. **CS**

RALPH METZNER is director of product management at FEI Behavioral Health and previously served as chief innovation officer at The Crisis Prevention Institute. FEI is a social enterprise wholly owned by the Alliance for Children and Families, a national network of nearly 500 human-serving organizations. www.fei.net.com