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Key communicators' perspectives on the use of social media in risks and crises

Harald Hornmoen, Klas Backholm, Elsebeth Frey, Rune Ottosen, Gudrun Reimerth Steen Steensen

This chapter examines how key communicators understand and evaluate opportunities and challenges of using social media in risk and crisis situations. We have conducted semi-structured interviews with several risk and crisis communicators, ranging from crisis information managers for authorities/NGOs and communicators specifically supporting first responders, to journalists and journalist advisors. Our study provides a preliminary understanding of how use of social media may contribute to altering role conceptions among different key crisis communicators and ultimately to changing different actors' communicative practices in risk and crisis situations.

Introduction

Social media play an increasingly important role for members of the public in risks and crises. However, a mismatch has existed between dominant communication strategies employed by communication managers (top-down, unidirectional, emphasis on traditional media) and the role that members of the public are playing. In emergencies, members of the public are using social media to communicate about the situation in different phases of the crises (Sutton et al. 2008), and they bypass traditional information gatekeepers such as organizations and traditional news media. To a considerable extent, users here control the creation and distribution of information. As Coombs (2012) suggests, crisis communicators using social media must adjust their traditional practices if they are to communicate effectively. Rather than one-sidedly controlling and feeding users with information, communicators need to *listen* to what social media users are saying and provide them with *access* to information.

Research into crisis/risk communication using social media (see further literature review below) suggests that communicators using social media need to develop their ability to prepare for, respond to and cope with crises situations. In addition, a lack of qualitative research into this area is a problem in itself. We have a poor understanding of crisis communicators' perceptions of how they can use social media in the best possible manner to increase their own and the public's situational awareness, that is, a state of understanding what is happening in an a crisis situation (Yin et al. 2012). How do key communicators perceive social media communication in risk and crises based on their experiences with such communication?

We see crisis communication managers as key figures in the process of building high professional and ethical standards of crisis communication. Such managers include decision makers, spokespersons and public information officers in institutions whose roles involve dealing with crises and risks. We are also of the opinion that journalists and the news organizations that employ them have an important role to play in enhancing situational awareness through news reporting on crisis.

Literature review

Although research on social media in crises is still in its infancy, it is quickly developing to include studies of social interactions and message content. Research has particularly focused on Twitter. In emergencies, some users generate information either by providing first-hand observations or by bringing relevant knowledge from external sources into Twitter. Analyzing tweets that were posted during Australia's worst fire disaster - Black Saturday in 2009 - Sinnappan et al. (2010) conclude that Twitter can be approached as an alternative communication tool carrying invaluable information to advice the public apart from relaying information from ground level to the authorities. Other studies point to shortcomings in

conventional understandings of emergency response. In their study of the use of social media in the 2007 Southern California Wildfires, Sutton et al (2008) suggest that community information resources and other backchannel communications activities enabled by social media are gaining prominence in the disaster area, despite concern by officials about the legitimacy of information shared through such means.

A problem with crises communication in social media is to separate reliable information from false rumors. Some studies (e.g. Mendoza et al. 2010 and Castillo et al. 2011) indicate that when information from official sources is scarce, several rumors posted and re-posted on Twitter contribute to increase the sense of chaos and insecurity in the local population. However, it is possible to develop methods to assess the credibility of information spread through social media networks. For instance, newsworthy topics tend to include URLs and to have deep propagation trees (Castillo et al. 2011). Another study shows that credible news is propagated through authors that have previously written a large number of messages, originate at a single or a few users in the network, and have many re-posts (Vieweg et al. 2010). Identifying such credible content and sources of information - whether by using online tools or through more traditional verification techniques - may contribute to enhancing situational awareness.ⁱ

A small-scale study (Kluge 2012) of the use of social media during the Utøya terrorist massacre in Norway in 2011, displays how Twitter became a place where the youth under attack could reach out with vital information and where people who were not directly affected by the terrorist attacks could support each other and share information. Twitter made it easier for the press to get an overview of the situation and the actors that were involved in the incident. However, the study also points to differing opinions on the use and reliability of Twitter as a source and information tool in emergencies. This research suggests that there is a

need to improve journalists' evaluation criteria for social media (SoMe) and their practice of source criticism.

Research question

The reviewed research suggests that crisis communication through social media could benefit from improved filtering and validation of SoMe content, as well as from communicators acquiring a better understanding of the opportunities social media provide for more efficient crisis management. However, as indicated above, we lack knowledge of how key crisis communicators view opportunities and desired improvements in SoMe use based on their experiences. To get a better grip of emerging practices and perspectives, we formulated the following research question:

How do key risk and crisis communicators understand and evaluate the opportunities and challenges of using social media in risk and crisis situations?

Method

To achieve a broad understanding of the issue, we have interviewed a range of key communicators working with different communicational tasks and roles in relation to different types of risks or crises. We targeted communicators with social media experience, based on the premise that such experience is a requirement for providing valuable perspectives. We interviewed communicators that we have divided into three groups depending on their tasks and roles in risk and crisis situations. The first group includes communicators supporting authorities'/NGOs crisis information management. They are key communicators who contribute in their organizations' processes of identifying, understanding, and coping with crises before, during, and after they have occurred. This group also includes

persons who communicate *risk* management: how organizations assess potential threats (such as health and terrorist threats) and advice the public on how to avoid such threats. The second group consists of communicators who are more directly involved in supporting first responders, emergency employees who are likely to be among the first people to arrive at the scene of an emergency. The third group includes journalists and journalist advisors, who are involved in a practice of producing and communicating news stories about risks and crises. We present our informants in table 1.

We conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with different communicators between September 2014 and February 2015. We secured a breadth of data by interviewing persons based in four European countries: Norway (8), Austria (4), Finland (3) and the United Kingdom (1). We interviewed 8 men and 8 women. All the interviewees had experience with Twitter in their professional work and some with Facebook, Instagram and blogs in addition.

We approached our interviewees through either a) a focus group interview (semi-structured) conducted in English at a seminar in Oslo and conducted by the authors on 18. September 2014ⁱⁱ and b) extensive semi-structured interviews conducted by individual researchers in Norway, Austria and Finland.ⁱⁱⁱ The focus group interview lasted for 156 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews conducted by individual researchers lasted from 60 to 90 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Table 1. Interview subjects

Researchers involved in the interviews translated interview data from interviews conducted in German, Finnish or Norwegian.

We posed the following guiding questions to all the interviewees:

- What do you consider as optimal risk and/or crisis communication in situations in which you have an important role?
- What do you consider as optimal risk/crisis communication involving social media?
- How can the use of social media be further developed to optimize key communicators' awareness of and response to the situation?
- How do you filter and validate risk/crisis information posted on social media during a threat or crisis situation?

Results and discussion

In this section, we elaborate on and discuss the expressed views of the informants in the three different groups (see table 1 above) related to 1) optimal risk and/or crisis communication and current shortcomings, and 2) improving social media use in risk and crises situations.

Optimal risk and/or crisis communication and current shortcomings

Authority/NGO crisis communication managers

Interviewees connected to national or regional authorities with communication management responsibilities, emphasize the importance of providing people with fast, updated, accurate, understandable and coordinated information. Some of them see optimal communication as reaching an appropriate communicational goal based on an understanding of the nature of the crisis or risk. For example, for the Institute of Public Health (NIPH) in Norway mitigating unfounded fear in the population was important in the case of Ebola in 2014, whereas getting people do something (e.g. get vaccinated) was important during the swine flu pandemic of 2009. In addition, the health governance communicators in England and Norway point out the challenge of maintaining an engagement during health crises that go on for months (e.g.

Swine Flu and Ebola) so that people do not lose interest in what the authorities have to say. In the absence of any new development, challenges also include maintaining trust and managing the stories, myths and rumors that people then start to generate.

Optimal communication using social media, then, involves listening to people's concerns. The head of the department for respiratory diseases in England admits to how they during the swine flu in 2009 could have benefited from listening to social media messages that informed about how a genetic disposition among people in Northern Scandinavian countries could cause narcolepsy in vaccinated people. In this way, they might "have had a heads-up at a much earlier stage".

However, the goal of listening by using social media is rather to get a grip of moods, questions, and rumors that authorities need to handle. According to the communication director at the NIPH, Twitter and Facebook give them a unique opportunity to capture things they need to manage.

Social media is a gift in situations such as when somebody wants to joke about Ebola, spread rumors such as the misconception that Ebola is spread through the air. Social media give us the possibility to pick up such misconceptions and provide correct information. In this way, we reach many people with the right information. We are not dependent on a journalist having understood what we say.

For NIPH, adapting crisis communication to the different functions of social media implies that Facebook is used for delivering information in individualized stories and advice for the public in general, whereas Twitter is particularly used to reach agenda-setters, decision makers, health professionals and the press. Other interviewees in this group also emphasize that dialogues with users on Twitter in particular give them an opportunity to convey their information effectively in direct contact with users.

Several of the interviewees emphasize that a lack of understanding of the importance of social media among top-level information managers and authorities is a major hindrance for beneficial use of SoMe in crisis communication. The result, according to some, is a lack of resources allocated to improving coordination and use of social media before, during and after crises.

In sum: although most of the interviewees emphasize the importance of engaging in dialogical risk and crisis communication facilitated by social media, the real benefits of SoMe for these communicators is apparently to get the right information through to people in a more efficient manner than they could when they had to rely more on traditional mass media. As the communication director of the Norwegian Police Security Service puts it:

Twitter is first priority for direct communication. We have been quite passive on Facebook, but realized after the terror threats against Norway in 2014 that we have to be more active on Facebook. How can we choose to abstain from arenas where the majority of the people will be in the next decade? We have to communicate with society. We need to be present in social media and influence it.

Communicators supporting first responders

Optimal communication is a somewhat different issue for communicators who support first responders. There is pressure coming in from the affected public. The state fire brigade communication officer in Austria called the extreme floods in the summer of 2013 “the first social media crisis”. The press spokesperson of the Styrian Fire Brigades points to a limited use of SoMe in the brigades at present. The authorities handle information management for the population, and the use of emergency tactics will not change by the use of social media channels: “Those who need help will get help. As soon as possible.” However, he does see

how they could improve social media communication in crises if they develop clearer conditions ('exact rules') for using them.

Clear conditions are also seen as crucial in the Ostrobothnian Police Department in Finland. They are currently able to monitor trending issues and to some degree respond to rumors, and prefer to post their updates via a static hub web page with links to chosen social media platforms. However, the communication suffers from a lack of understanding of the "new" specific requirements set by social media, e.g. related to the media format, timing of communication, and organizational resources needed:

It is all about being fast with information, and informing even though we do not have anything to inform about. This is where we do not function well, if we cannot give something new, we choose not to inform at all. We have not understood that it is important to tell the people that we have nothing new to tell them.

The Oslo Police communicators express concern about how the required rapidness of communication in acute situations may lead to inaccurate information, whereas the Austrian fire brigade emphasize how people easily can misinterpret information provided to them through social media. Some of the interviewees in this group see major shortcomings in relation to their needs for swift and reliable information from users involved in or close to unfolding crises, be it verbal or visual information. For the Ostrobothnian Police Department's spokesperson, verification processes for user-generated content are currently too slow. The advisor at the Norwegian Emergency Communication points out a lack of a system to track and validate potentially important visual documentation from crises posted on social media.

Journalists and journalist advisors

Interviewees representing journalistic institutions, stress the need to maintain principles of ethics and good standards of journalism in crisis communication, not least principles of truthfulness, accuracy, and the need to use several sources and verify information. For the APA editor, reporting on a crisis in which you only have from minutes to an hour to publish news is best served by relying on “traditional sources”, whether it is a police, an official, or three or four news agencies. “Professional journalists on a desk have to know the quality of their sources”, he claims. When news of a big, sudden crisis breaks, he finds that there is an abundance of information on social media, but that one cannot verify the messages posted on Twitter by someone who supposedly is observing something.

The social media advisor at the NRK also points to the need to maintain established verification routines as a basis for crisis reporting.

In journalism, when something breaks you want eyes and ears on the ground. This has always been the hallmark of reporting, and journalism is still about determining fact from fiction. We want the same from social media as we always have wanted. We want facts. Preferably, from two minutes ago and from someone we trust. If it is not from someone we trust, we want it to be somewhere where we can verify it. We want several sources. It is still just journalism.

For the NRK advisor, they could strengthen the significance of the media organization’s presence in social media if they were able to validate user-generated content through some industry standards, and to apply knowledge acquired through periods when a crisis is not unfolding. The APA editor is more doubtful about the possibility of optimizing crisis reporting by using social media sources. He compares searching for valuable information in social media with trying to find gold rings in *Cloaca Máxima* (the sewage system in ancient Rome).

The Utøya survivor among the journalist interviewees points out how victims of

violence are unstable, and need to be met with a careful and caring language. In such situations, journalists should consider using other sources, such as the police or witnesses that have not been directly affected. She further emphasizes how a beneficial use of social media in such cases may occur in a phase of grief processing after the acute crisis, pointing to the comforting function of a widely shared tweet after the Utøya massacre: “When a man can cause so much evil, think about how much love we can create together.”

In the eyes of the journalism interviewees, then, current shortcomings in the use of social media during crises are a lack of competence and routines for verifying user-generated content in crises reporting, and underdeveloped ethical guidelines.

Improving social media use in risk and crises situations

Authority/NGO crisis communication managers

How can key communicators further develop their use of social media to optimize their own and the public’s awareness of and response to risk and crises? Authority/NGO information managers voice different opinions on what is most needed. The PHE head believes that tools to filter and tease out valid information may help them detect important information. The NIPH communication director could need a good monitoring tool for social media and tools for validating the credibility of sources’ information. However, she stresses that one cannot improve use of social media by seeing them in isolation from an overall crisis communication plan of which social media are an important part. Important for development is to arrange more acute emergency exercises to be better prepared for the speed of information needed in such situations.

Other interviewees also view it as vital to develop competence through training. For the Regional State Agency in Finland, an emphasis is on training to create good information strategies to prevent rumors. In the Finnish Red Cross they consider it important to develop a

readiness for social media participation during “expected” peaks such as anniversaries, as well as to start using social media as an internal platform for mapping needs in regional areas after disasters. For the web editor at the Norwegian crisis information, having more staff members that are trained in social media is more important than having more tools:

We need people that know how to do this and a crisis communication plan that emphasizes that we are going to prioritize social media.

When questioned about how they currently filter and validate social media messages, interviewees in this group do not necessarily see this as a vital issue in their communication efforts. Presumably, this reflects how these institutions see their role as channeling their information on social media - or correcting user-generated content - rather than using social media as a source of factual information.

Communicators supporting first responders

For the communication officers of the Austrian fire brigades, the increasing use of smartphones creates conditions for improving direct communication and activates victims in a crisis so that they can handle the situation in the best possible manner. In the acute crisis phase in which swift action is required, verification of social media is not an issue for them. However, they are concerned about unfortunate consequences of swiftly spread information. It can stir up emotions and lead to wrong interpretations of information, and to people not acting as they should. This fear is shared by the communication director for the Ostrobothnia police, who suggests a need for more unorthodox strategies, such as benefitting from the crowdsourcing expertise among ordinary users to monitor social media and verify content, but within an ethically acceptable framework.

The Oslo police communicators believe that with more people dedicated to social media, these media could be communication channels more than information channels. In this way they could pick up on information generated from people on SoMe that may be useful to them. On ordinary days, the operational level of the police follows what people tweet, but there is no time for this during a crisis. Their department of communication then takes over tweeting and moderation, sometimes while sitting in the operational central.

Journalists and journalist advisors

When pondering the question of how to improve social media use in crises, journalists and journalist advisors express a different view of the possible value of user-generated content as a source of information than the other two groups. Even the APA *editor*, who is currently doubtful about the possibility of verifying Twitter content, sees some ground for improving the use of social media as a news source in acute crisis phases, if one could establish a “social media crisis network of trusted partners”. Whereas the *journalist* at APA believes that much can be gained if crisis authorities engage more extensively on Twitter, the NRK advisor sees the challenge mainly as a question of improved training of journalists:

We need to learn to verify content in a dialogue with users who generated it by asking questions such as: ‘Are you actually there? When was this picture taken? Where were you standing? Can we have the data so we can verify this?’ We need journalists who have that under their skin and their fingers, before something big happens.

Filtering and validating SoMe messages is partly seen as a question about applying established journalistic verification routines and partly as requiring improved internal coordination between staff members and better routines for handling tools/applications.

The Utøya survivor/journalist, on her hand, stresses a need for improved ethical

treatment of crisis victims and families, after having experienced “the storm of journalists” contacting Utøya youth by phone or through social media when they were in a state of shock. Practical crisis training emphasizing ethical aspects and ethical guidelines with an outspoken focus on best practices when approaching first-hand victims via SoMe could improve journalistic conduct in such situations.

Conclusions

The question we posed is how key risk and crisis communicators understand and evaluate the opportunities and challenges of using social media in risk and crisis situations. Table 2 summarizes the answers we found.

Table 2. Key crisis communicators’ perspectives on SoMe use

The communicators in our study see much potential in using social media to create improved situational awareness and management of risks and crises. However, they point to several deficiencies in current uses of SoMe in emergencies. Interviewees in both crisis management organizations and journalistic institutions point out lack of personnel, lack of organizational routines and coordination, and insufficient training as obstacles. A major reason for these current inadequacies is apparently a lack of understanding and interest in social media in the leadership of crisis communication institutions.

We also found some noteworthy differences between the various groups’ views on what the benefits and challenges of using social media in crises are. Crisis communication managers tend to view dialogical communication as something that enables correction of the public’s misconceptions during crises. The first responder communicators to a larger degree see postings from SoMe users as containing potentially vital information for them in order to

act swiftly and effectively in acute situations. The journalist group also sees a potential value of communicating information in their news stories originally acquired from SoMe users that are present on crisis scenes.

We see such differences in the groups' assessment of the potential value of user-generated content in crisis communication as partly reflecting their distinctive professional roles. The roles range from assessing, understanding and coping with crisis through all its phases (crisis communication managers), to supporting swift and purposeful action in emergency situations (first responder communicators), to producing engaging news stories that report from crisis scenes (journalists and journalist advisors). We believe that communication in all groups - including the communication managers - can benefit from regarding user-generated content as potentially crucial for enhancing situational awareness and advising on best possible action in crises.

The question remains, however, of how to filter and validate social media messages posted by the public during crises. Our research suggests a need for more knowledge about such competencies and procedures in specific crisis communication contexts. Our interviewees express different views as well as uncertainty about filtering and validation of SoMe content. Some see a potential value in developing tools that could assist them with filtering trustworthy sources and verifying user-generated content. Others emphasize the prevailing need to follow or adjust established verification routines when evaluating social media. It is also worth noting how our interviewees emphasize the need for stronger coordination and training of communicators as a precondition for any sensible use of social media and tools to evaluate their content.

The differing views on validation strategies reflect the current nature of the social media landscape. SoMe platforms, content formats, and users' usage patterns are dynamic and continuously changing, and therefore, creating well-functioning information validation

strategies or a robust organizational understanding of social media platforms is a challenging task.

Notes

ⁱ There are several online tools available at present that journalists can use for verification. Brandtzaeg et al. (2015) point out that we do not know the extent to which journalists use verification tools such as SocialMention, Storyful, Politifact, Fastfact, Topsy, Sulia, TinEye, FotoForensics and Trackur.

ⁱⁱ Nick Phin, Kristina Brekke Jørgensen, Werner Müllner, Ingeborg Volan and Hildegunn Falang were all interviewed in English at this occasion.

ⁱⁱⁱ Harald Hornmoen interviewed Christina Rolfheim Bye (19.11.14) in Norwegian, and Thomas Meier (16.09.14) by mail in English. Klas Backholm interviewed Annette Rinne (04.11.14), Hanna Pekka Laiho by phone (31.10.14), both in Finnish, and Mikael Appel (06.11.14), in Swedish. Gudrun Reimerth interviewed Herman Kollinger (04.11.2014) and Verena Leiss (05.11.14) by phone, both in German. Elsebeth Frey interviewed Kari Huseby and Martine Leang (29.01.15) in Norwegian. Rune Ottosen interviewed Trond Hugubakken (07.11.2014) in Norwegian. Steen Steensen interviewed Jens Leirvåg by phone (05.12.14) in Norwegian. If not otherwise mentioned, interviewees were interviewed face-to-face.

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Further reading

P. Brandtzaeg et al, “Emerging Journalistic Verification Practices Concerning Social Media,” *Journalism Practice* (2015, see details in reference above) contributes to new knowledge on journalists' social media working practices. M. Eriksson, “Managing collective trauma on social media: the role of Twitter after the 2011 Norway attacks”. *Media, Culture & Society* (2015): 1–16, is an interesting analysis of the meaning-making discourse on Twitter during the six days following the 2011 terrorist attacks and massacre in Norway.

Table 1. Interview subjects

Group	Name	Role
Crisis communication managers representing authorities/NGOs	Nick Phin	Head of respiratory diseases in Public Health England (PHE).
	Christina Rolfheim-Bye	Communications director at the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (NIPH)
	Kristina Brekke Jørgensen	Web editor of Kriseinfo.no at the Directorate of Civil Protection and Emergency Planning (DSB) in Norway
	Annette Rinne	Communication director at the Regional State Administrative Agency in Western and Mid-Finland
	Hannu-Pekka Laiho	Communication director at the Finnish Red Cross,
	Trond Hugubakken	Communication director at The Norwegian Police Security Service (PST)
Communicators supporting first responders	Thomas Meier	Head of public relations/press speaker at the state fire brigade association in Styria, Austria
	Hermann Kollinger	Public relations officer at the association of the upperaustrian firebrigades and operation officer at the fire brigade Alkoven, Austria
	Kari Huseby/Martine Leang	Communication director/officer at Oslo Police, Norway
	Mikael Appel	Head of communication of Ostrobothnia Police Department in Finland
	Jens Leirvåg	Advisor at Kokom (National Centre on Emergency Communication in Health)
Journalists and journalist advisors	Werner Müllner	Deputy Editor in Chief & CIO of the Austrian Press Agency (APA)
	Verena Leiss	Journalist at Austrian Press Agency (APA), Bureau Linz
	Ingeborg Volan	Head of social media at the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK)
	Hildegunn Fallang	Journalist and survivor of the Utøya terrorist attack in Norway on the 22. July 2011

Table 2. Key crisis communicators' perspectives on social media use

	Optimal SoMe crises communication	Shortcomings in current use of SoMe in crises situations	How to improve use of SoMe in crises situations
Authority/NGO crisis communication managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Listen to people's concerns ● Get a grip of moods, questions, rumors and myths and engage in dialogue ● Distribute information via SoMe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of good system to monitor SoMe ● Lack of understanding of the importance of SoMe / negative attitude ● Do not listen enough 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Need better tools to monitor and analyze SoMe-content ● Need more people who know how to deal with SoMe ● Communicate via mobile devices, must plan for power fall outs
Communicators supporting first responders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use one platform for all information (all authorities together) ● Rapid, open and honest sharing of information ● To have a system that quickly can track/validate information (especially pictures) from crisis scenes published on SoMe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A challenge to balance need for info and ensure correct info ● Too slow procedures for verifying SoMe content and identities ● No system to track and validate SoMe pictures/facts from crises scenes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Make SoMe use mandatory for communication officers ● Have enough personnel dedicated to SoMe communication in acute crisis ● Need training and established routines for how to communicate via SoMe
Journalists and journalist advisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Continuous communication in SoMe, especially Twitter ● Journalists have know-how on how to monitor, find and assess relevant SoMe-information ● SoMe functions as a channel for alleviating grief 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of competence on how to verify SoMe-content ● Lack of ethical guidelines ● SoMe are networks of emotions, cannot verify content ● Authorities use SoMe poorly – information gathering difficult 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Need journalists who understand the dialogical aspects of SoMe ● Develop ethical guidelines ● Get authorities to use SoMe more often ● Establish a SoMe crisis network of trusted partners