SOCIAL MEDIA IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Burkitbayeva Meruyert Bakhytzhankyzy
m.burkitbaeva@gmail.com
Phd student, Faculty of Journalism and political science, L.N.Gumilyov Eurasian National University,
Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan
Supervisor – B. Omarov

Crisis management is an integral part of Public Relations which helps organisations to protect their reputation. 'Crisis is an event that is an unpredictable, significant threat that can have the severe effect on the organisation, industry, or stakeholders if handled improperly' [1, p.2]. Crisis can generate several threats to the public safety, a reputational loss which leads to financial problems for commercial organisations and interaction with the main stakeholders. Crisis communication is a process created to prevent or minimise the damage that crisis can cause for the organisation and its stakeholders.

If a crisis threatens to cause a severe financial loss for commercial companies [2], for public sector organisations that are the subject of this study means loss of the public's support and their trust. The main aim of public sector organisations is to serve people, so general public's perception and attitude towards them is crucial. Emergency services, local or central government and other organisations within the sector are often hit by criticisms and crises [3].

The nature of the crisis is changing and becoming complex [4]. The changing nature of crisis communication is logical due to development of digital media. Digitalisation has had a significant impact on communication itself. Social media has changed the way how organisations handle the crisis. Every single issue is spreading with a high pace on the net. Social media is also shrinking the time for organisations to respond to the crisis [5,6].

Social media has had a significant impact on almost every single notion of PR, especially the nature and strategies of crisis management which has been altered due to the immediate two-nature of two-way social media communications. Results revealed differences how public sector organisations handle the crisis in two countries and strategies they use. It also found out that social media has changed the speed of the crisis and provided more two-way communication between an organisation and its public. However, its credibility and increasing user generated content are issues raised because of digital media.

This report discusses and analyses the results of six conducted interviews with PR practitioners based both UK and Kazakhstan. The majority of respondents work for public sector organisations, while others used to have such experience in their career. The results will be examined using a thematic analysis and the significant outcomes.

The interviews identified four main topics discussed below as a result of the primary research in how social media has changed the crisis communication in public sector. They are speed, two-way communications, wider public and citizen journalism.

Speed is one of the main alterations made by social media and is a factor upon which all of the interviewees agreed. The main rule in online crisis suggested by Regester and Larkin (2008)[5, p.52] suggested that in online crisis "Speed is of the essence. A crisis simply will not wait. Tell it all, tell it fast, tell ittruthfully".

Speed itself is the most challenging and integral part of any crisis communication. However, with social media "Golden hours" given to response became "golden minutes". Therefore, the practice approves the theory in all ways.

The majority of experts agreed with two-way communications becoming another feature of online crisis communication. This applies to both public sector and commercial organisations. There is definitely more two-way communication with social media. Organisations can see what stakeholders are saying and doing and understand their opinions on developments. However, information is sometimes incorrect and can be shared quickly with many people which means PR team needs to correct information and bust myths. The public sometimes is a lot more forgiving if they know that you are going to communicate with them as well. Even it is a bad situation for people, at least if organization is talking to them and they know that you are listening to them.

With social media, people acquired a chance to express their views on certain issues and interact with other users. Many organisations now moved from one-to-many communication type to "meaningful two-way dialogue"[7, p.20]. However, it is a question of transparency whether the communication is two-way symmetric or asymmetric. In some cases, organisations might not want to disclose all details of the crisis depending on different reasons especially if it involves legal issues.

There is another issue raised by respondents about the credibility of online interaction and this view challenges the theory of Colley & Collier (2009) [8] which states that word of mouth is incredibly influential and it is believed to be more credible than media in some cases. There is a gap between two-way communication and its credibility that may influence communication during the crisis. The two-way communication also addresses issues about increasing chance of incorrect information being spread on social media back to GS's pointabove.

The view about reaching the wider public through social media should be taken into account, although only one expert mentioned this.

Communication with your public directly on social media during a crisis not only allows to reach the wide range of audience it also saves time and puts your message straight after its release, while for mainstream media it takes time depending on the type of media and its frequency of release. However, if we take the age range of users into account, some older generation may not be familiar with digital media. Both social media and mainstream media engagement should be included to crisis communication strategy.

User generated content is also the focus dealing with crisis online.Social media users can be called "citizen journalists" – the photos they post from the scene of incidents can become huge stories within a matter of seconds.If something happens, some companies or organisations may find out this through social media. The actual information can come externally in seconds.People become aware of every situation and can report on social media.Social media is highly used as a source of information now. It is assumed that 20-30% of all news in media are from social media.

The terms such as "citizen journalism", "user generated media" are evolving and becoming the reason for some crisis cases where users can trigger the crisis or reinforce occurred one with an image, audio or video content. Everyone with a smartphone can be a "source of information"[9, p.10]. There is also a tendency of social media posts becoming the story on mainstream media in both countries. The research conducted by Solis (2009) [10] concluded that 92% of communication practitioners also think that social media and blogs have an impact on media coverage. The results support the theory of the high influence of citizen journalism in crisis management.

Although there is no great difference between the theory and the practice of using social media in crisis communication in public sector, outcomes showed that some strategies might vary in two different countries UK and Kazakhstan. With the development of social media, the nature of crisis management has been significantly changed. The study attempted to investigate how digital media has altered crisis

communication in public sector on the basis of two countries UK and Kazakhstan was conducted. The field of Public relations and crisis communications is brand new in Kazakhstan to compare with the UK, and the study helped to identify effective strategies for crisis management that can be applied in Kazakhstan.

The discussion regarding crisis communication in the public sector revealed two significant themes.

First is about its difference from private sector, and second is focused on handling crisis in emergencyservices.

The majority of experts did not highlight any significant differences of handling crisis between public and private sectors. Instead they provided some features of crisis communication depending on their type of organisation within the public sector from their own observation andexperience. Public sector organisations handle crises situations much better than commercial organisations. The simple reason for that is their purpose that is publicservice. As public service organisations have duty to serve people, public are priority in crisis communication especially if a situation includes emergency and they should be warned and informed about it. Emergency services are more prepared to what to do if worse things happen. It is about preparation and expectation.

However, there is a contradiction in handling crisis in public sector in the UK and Kazakhstan. If UK PR practitioners say that there are no significant differences, the expert from Kazakhstan insists that the strategies are completely different. Strategies of crisis communication in public sector are completely different. First of all, public sector organisations are more administrative and they are state-funded. The difference between public and private sector is about the use of different communication tools. State-funded organisations have easy access to almost all national media, whereas commercial companies are tied to their budget.

The reason for this outcome can be a difference between media management and its source of funding in the both countries. Main national and local media corporations are state-owned in Kazakhstan and as referenced by the respondent, this means that majority of public sector organisations cooperate with them in a regularly basis including during thecrisis.

Emergency services are another important part of public sector organisations and they are more likely to deal with different types of crises on a routinely basis. Questions regarding emergency crisis communication revealed various interesting points that was mentioned several times by different respondents. They are "the importance of cooperation of emergency services", "providing facts" and "having a person on site".

The first thing that was praised by three experts about emergency services' response to the Grenfell Tower Fire is their cooperation with each other in dealing with thecrisis.

Cobra crises such as a massive fire requires quick response and action from all emergency services and it is important to them to be aware of every news and decisions. [3, p.265] agree that 'Crisis management demands rapid and timely coordination, not only between members within a team but also between members of different teams. As each team's roles and duties vary from each other, working in cooperation gives them opportunity to increase their efficiency in handling crisis effectively.

Another strategy in such situations mentioned by experts is providing only facts and prevent speculations.

Holding a statement with facts about the crisis is a rational thing to do in emergency case [11]. When crisis involves fatalities, the public may be angry, very emotional, as well as active and a lack of official statement with facts can give them opportunity to create their own side of story which would be extremely difficult to disprove. It might not be enough time to provide facts in short time when crisis hits, but rumours are everywhere [12]. If an organisation fails to provide their side of story, they allow a rumour cycle to be fed with lies. Dealing with facts is an integral part of any effective emergency services' crisis communication.

In a crisis such Grenfell Tower Fire involving human deaths, it is worth to have a person on site. Two experts agree that it is important to put human face on such situations.

According to Sutton et al. (2008) [13] not only information needed during crisis, but it also about human interaction. A crisis with fatal outcome challenges people's trust, first on its government and other public sector organisations somehow responsible for the issue. For this reason, it is important to have a spokesperson on scene talkingto survivors and affected ones, listening to them, supporting as well as showing their seriousness on the issue.

To sum up, the interview with PR practitioners showed the importance of proactive crisis management in terms of emergency. Cooperation between different organisations will be beneficial for all parties involved in the crisis. Official information is needed to combat rumours and fake news. The latter is even worsened with development of social media. Human interaction was stated as top three actions in handling emergencies especially if the crisis includes fatalities. An audience and victims expect empathy from the involved party.

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