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Parody social media accounts: Influence and impact on organizations during crisis

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Abstract

With the uptake of the use of social media, the communication field has seen a rise in a new phenomenon: parody social media accounts. Through study of five such accounts, this paper shows how parody social media accounts can arise from a crisis or paracrisis, which is “a publicly visible crisis threat” that is triggered online (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 409). The study also examines the behavior of these accounts and how they enforce negative perceptions and impede an organization's efforts and initiatives. Using the social-mediated crisis communication model as its theoretical lens, this study seeks to examine parody social media accounts and their impact on organizations in times of crisis. Finally, the paper also gives recommendations on how organizations can respond effectively to these accounts.

Keywords

Social media, Crisis communication, Public relations, Twitter, Facebook, Parody accounts

1. Introduction

Social media is the new buzzword among public relations practitioners. In recent years, there has been an exponential increase in the uptake of the use of social media among organizations. Horton (2009) discovered that 79 percent of Fortune 100 companies use some form of social media to communicate with their stakeholders. Harvard Business Review (2010) reported that in 2010, Twitter reached a benchmark of 50 million tweets and Facebook had over 500 million users worldwide, with a projection of one billion total users by 2011. In the same article by the Harvard Business Review (2010), it was reported that the average amount of time spent on social networking sites increased 82 percent from 2010 to 2011. This has presented organizations with a new avenue to communicate with stakeholders, especially in times of crisis (Siah, Bansal & Pang, 2010).

One new phenomenon observed is the rise of parody social media accounts (Smith, 2010). These parody accounts purport to present the views of the official spokesperson while posting satirical messages. They are engaging in what Business Week calls “brandjacking” (Hesseldahl, 2007), where someone assumes the online identity of another entity. Using the social-mediated crisis communication model as its theoretical lens, this study seeks to examine parody social media accounts and their impact on organizations in times of crisis.

2. Literature review

The proliferation of social media has increased the speed at which information is shared and received, thus forcing organizations to respond more quickly to events. Failure to handle social media adequately can result in what Johansen and Frandsen (2007) defined as a double crisis. A double crisis occurs when the original crisis is overshadowed by a “communication crisis” because the organization has failed to perform the expected communication practices (p. 79).

The social-mediated crisis communication model (SMCC) examines how crisis can be sparked and spread online through a variety of social media platforms and offline social interactions. In this model, Austin, Liu and Jin (2012) identified three types of publics:

1. Influential social media creators, who produce crisis information for others to consume;
2. Social media followers, who consume the influential social media creators’ information; and,
3. Social media inactives, who may consume influential social media creator's crisis information indirectly through word-of-mouth communication with social media followers and/or traditional media that follow influential social media creators and/or social media followers.

Parody social media accounts can be classified under influential social media creators because they create crisis information for publics to consume.

In this study, we posit the following research questions:

RQ 1: How/when do parody social media accounts emerge?

RQ 2: What happens in parody social media accounts?

RQ 3: How do parody social media accounts compromise organizations’ efforts on their official social media accounts?

RQ 4: How should organizations respond to parody social media accounts?

3. Method

The case-study approach was employed for this study. As there are no prior studies on parody social media, this approach is optimal for our exploratory study. The cases studied are:

	Description
1. Tin Pei Ling Duration of study: 16 April 2011 to 28 June 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She was the youngest political candidate appointed by Singapore's ruling political party, People's Action Party (PAP), in the 2011 General Elections • She came under fire when a photo of her with a Kate Spade bag started circulating on Facebook and Twitter • Parody Twitter account @Fake_TinPeiLing was set up in April
2. Qantas Airways Duration of study: 29 October 2011 to 11 February 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • October 2011–Qantas chief Alan Joyce announced a lock-out in an industrial dispute that grounded its entire fleet for 48 h and caused 68,000 travelers to be stranded. • On the first day of the lock-out the parody Twitter account @QantasPR appeared online and caused confusion for consumers believing it was real • Twitter forcibly shut it down in February
3. Mitt Romney Duration of study: 11 January 12 to 28 August 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 January 2012–Mitt Romney revealed his Mexican heritage by relating stories of his father's struggles when he moved to the States • The parody Twitter account @MexicanMitt appeared 2 days after Romney made the comment
4. British Petroleum (BP) Duration of study: 19 May 2010 to 19 September 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 April 2010–a BP-operated oil rig exploded, killed 11 workers, and caused an oil spill, leaking about five million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico • In addition, BP's CEO Tony Hayward angered the public with his insensitive comments in a televised interview • Parody Twitter account @BPGlobalPR was set up in response
5. SMRT Corporation Ltd (SMRT) Duration of study: 16 December 2011 to 22 August 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five-hour train breakdown along Singapore's North-South subway lines on 15 December 2011 affected 127,000 passengers, including 1000 trapped in stalled trains • A fake SMRT Facebook page–SMRT (Feedback)–was set up a day after the breakdown, with a parody Twitter account @smrtsg created a week later • Facebook account was shut down on 22 August 2012

3.1. Data analysis

First, tweets from each parody account were collected in chronological order using Topsy searches. Second, relevant online articles were compiled to substantiate our study. Third, three datasets were set up: tweets from the parody account; tweets from the legitimate account; and tweets by the public in response to the crisis. Fourth, tweets from the three designated datasets were analyzed to arrive at general patterns and behaviors.

4. Findings and discussion

For this study, all subjects in the five cases will be referred to as organizations.

RQ 1: How/when do parody social media accounts emerge?

First, parody social media accounts emerge as manifestations of an event that causes public ridicule. @QantasPR was set up on the same day Qantas announced the lockout; the parody Facebook account SMRT Ltd (Feedback) was created 1 day after the massive train breakdown while @MexicanMitt was set up 2 days after Romney's campaign speech. The appearance of these accounts in relation to the actual crises, along with posts that centered around the crises, suggests that the parody accounts are manifestations of the crisis or what Coombs and Holladay (2012) called paracrisis a “publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior” (p. 409).

Second, parody social media accounts emerge when smoldering issues are mishandled. In the case of BP, the account appeared only after several smoldering issues were mishandled. These issues include misrepresentations of the extent of the oil spill, threats to arrest the media to prevent them from visiting the Gulf beaches and BP CEO Tony Hayward making light of the oil spill. All these actions angered stakeholders, resulting in the appearance of @BPGlobalPR a month after the oil spill.

Third, parody social media accounts emerge when there is an information vacuum. When ongoing issues are not addressed, an information vacuum (Pang, 2013) is created. Tin Pei Ling was faced with several reputation-threatening issues, including online furor of a photo of her posing with a designer bag, accusations of nepotism and allegations of materialism and privilege. Tin took no significant action to address these issues and opted to close her social media accounts. As a result of this information vacuum, @Fake_TinPeiLing appeared 2 weeks later.

RQ 2: What happens in parody social media accounts?

The first few posts of a parody account are usually directly related or referenced to this crisis, as seen in the cases of Tin Pei Ling and BP Global. Beyond the first few posts or tweets, parody social media accounts have been observed to present certain patterns and behavior. First, they assume the voice of the original organization, causing social media followers to associate them with the original organization. In all five cases, the parody accounts assumed the voice of the organization or its public relations arm.

Second, they provide a platform and accentuate satirical comments on issues the organization is facing. In such cases, the reaction from parody accounts is almost immediate. For Qantas and SMRT, their parody accounts constructed timely posts that centered around new issues in the organizations' operations. In the cases of BP and Romney, the parody accounts made satirical comments about slip-ups made when addressing the public.

Third, parody accounts reinforce existing negative perceptions and keep them top-of-mind. For Tin Pei Ling, her association with luxury bags and her childish mannerisms were key characteristics that the parody account sought to portray. For BP, the parody account reinforced the perception that BP is an organization that prioritizes reputation and money over the safety of its stakeholders.

Fourth, the accounts discredit the organization's initiatives. The creators of @QantasPR followed new initiatives from Qantas closely and published posts to cast these initiatives in a negative light. Most tweets of this type arose from Qantas' biggest social media faux pas in 2011: the Qantas Luxury campaign. In BP's case, the parody account criticized BP's use of paid media to express its apology instead of directing funds toward clean-up efforts.

RQ 3. How do parody social media accounts compromise organizations' efforts on their official social media accounts?

4.1. Confusion

In times of crisis, people seek information to cope. However, when parody accounts provide inaccurate information, they create confusion and accentuate stress for stakeholders. When Qantas requested that @QantasPR be removed, the main reason cited was that the fake account caused a great amount of confusion for its consumers. Similarly, a portion of users who interacted with SMRT's parody account were upset with SMRT's apparently rude attitude.

4.2. Compromise organizational messages through bona fide social media accounts

Messages from parody accounts strengthen the link between parody accounts and social media followers while weakening the link between official accounts and their followers. For the BP crisis, the voice of the parody account @BPGlobalPR overpowered the official account @BP_America with its number of followers. At one point, the parody account had 81,000 followers, ten times more than the official account (Goddard, 2010). For Qantas, @QantasPR account was able to lead efforts in crippling the Qantas Luxury campaign, hijacking the hashtag #QantasLuxury and encouraging consumers to follow suit. The campaign was declared by the media as one of the biggest PR failures of the year, making it to “mUmBRELLA's Top 7 Social Media Disasters list of 2011” (“Qantas in new social media fail,” 2011)

4.3. Impacts relationship between the organization and its stakeholders

As discussed in RQ 2, parody accounts continually reinforced negative perceptions of the organizations, which worsened the link between organizations and their followers. The parody account @MexicanMitt maintained consistent negative messaging throughout the study, averaging 38 tweets per day, whereas Romney's official account averaged about one tweet per day. Tweets from BP's parody account portrayed BP as an irresponsible organization that prioritized profits and reputation, which put a dent in BP's relationship with its stakeholders. The constant reminders refresh followers' memory of the issue, keeping negative issues and perceptions fresh.

RQ 4. How should organizations respond to parody social media accounts?

4.4. Parody social media accounts response strategies

From the case studies, all organizations except Qantas and BP chose to ignore the parody accounts. However, we strongly believe that parody accounts should never be ignored and that organizations should always respond to these parody accounts to demonstrate they are in control and to assert their voices in the information vacuum.

In determining the best response strategy, the authors have proposed a checklist of strategies to determine how the organizations should respond.

1. Does the parody account cause confusion? Confusion can arise when users misinterpret parody accounts' satirical messaging. In cases like @QantasPR and SMRT (Feedback), confusion did not merely degrade the relationship between organizations and their social media followers, it affected their official account's ability to function properly.
2. Is the parody account overpowering the organization's voice? As discussed in RQ 3, organizations need to ensure that their voice is not drowned out by the parody account. Should the organizational voice be drowned out, it allows this negative messaging to be placed at the top of consciousness for its followers, thereby posing a threat to the organization.

- Has traditional media followed up on the story? Parody accounts can cause reputational damage because their existence and how they compromise on organizational messaging can gain credibility when mainstream media cover the story (Pang, Nasrath, & Chong, 2014).

Table 1 integrates the checklist and response strategies. The authors contend that when none of the items are compromised, the organization should dissociate and leave the account as it is. Examples include @MexicanMitt, @Fake_TinPeiLing. When one of the items is compromised, the organization should dissociate and request a disclaimer, which helps the organization to appear less confrontational. When two or more of the items are compromised, the organization should increase its intensity of response. After dissociating itself, the organization should request that the social media platform remove the account. Qantas made a good judgment when it requested the removal of @QantasPR. The authors of this paper argue that BP and SMRT should have done likewise toward @BPGlobalPR and @smrtsg, respectively.

Table 1. Parody social media account response strategies.

	None applies	At least one applies	At least two apply
1. Does it cause confusion?		✓	✓
2. Does it overpower the organization's voice?			✓
3. Has traditional media picked it up?			
Response Strategy	Dissociate & leave account as it is @MexicanMitt, @Fake.TinPeiLing	Dissociate & request for disclaimer of account Nil	Dissociate & request for removal of account @BPGlobalPR

Organizations need to determine when to take action against parody accounts and when to leave them alone. The response strategies cited above are by no means exhaustive, but provide organizations a good guide on responding to parody accounts.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzed five parody social media accounts of organizations and public figures in both local and foreign contexts, examining their causes, impact and influence during crises and suggested strategies to cope with these accounts. There were three limitations to this study. First, the difficulty of finding all the posts during the stated time period from the five case studies. Some of the accounts were deleted or suspended temporarily, which meant that analysis could only be done using tools like Topsy, which does not offer a complete database. Second, the lack of accounts for study may lead to less representative findings and restricted application of response strategies for organizations. However, since common themes for emergence and impact could be identified, the authors have confidence that these findings will also recur in future parody accounts. It is hoped that this study can serve as an initial framework for practical application when companies encounter parody accounts.

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