

COMS 560 Conflict Brief 2

Secondary Communication Crisis: Social Media News Information

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Executive Summary

Social media is an ever evolving door of receiving and sharing information. Whether it be real or fake news, the receiver responds in two emotional ways: anger or fear (Lu and Huang, 2018).

Depending on which emotional response affects the cognitive abilities and the behavior outcome of the receiver of information. Do they “like” or “share” the information into becoming secondary crisis communication? Or do they spiral into silence thinking they are the minority? An and Gower (2009) states that when reporting on a crisis, the news media tend to attribute the information to an organization or individual. The media tend to put light on a specific character to attribute the story to someone or something. When that happens the receiver shifts to emotional behaviors and cognitive behaviors, if they re-share the information, and their own bias on the news story, the online news starts again to become a revolving door of information (Lu and Huang, 2018). McLuhan (1964) states that the method of the medium in which you use is actually the message you are portraying to the audience. The “medium (media) is the message” (1964, p.7). Currently, the most use form of media to obtain news is social media. The Pew Research Center found that 68% of adults in the United States say they occasionally get their news from social media. However, more than half, 57%, says that they expect the news to be inaccurate (Shearer & Matsu, 2018). However, even when there are inaccuracies, “liking” and “sharing” still happen, even with the belief of inaccuracies. This paper proposes to shed light on how people receive information and respond during secondary crisis communication situations.

Keywords: Secondary crisis communication, online news, COVID-19, emotional contagion, social media, emotional behavior, cognitive behavior, instant gratification, influence, bias

Secondary Crisis Communication & Emotional-to-Cognitive Behavior

The role of online news information is vast, expansive, and ever changing. During a world crisis such as COVID-19, the online receivers of news information respond very differently to information. An and Gower state that “people seek information about the crisis and evaluate the cause of the event and the organization responsibility for the crisis based on media coverage of the crisis” (2009, p.1). Hanson (2019) states that “the web [social media included] excels at providing obscure materials that appeal to a limited, widely dispersed audience, and it makes it easy for receiver to respond to what they’ve seen or hear” (p. 38). Secondary crisis communication is described as “crisis information communicated among and by the public” (Zheng et al., 2018). Social media and the way people communicate news stories, factual or non-factual, become secondary crisis communication, or SCC. The SCC responds on emotional-to-cognitive behavior. Lu and Huang (2018) describe two main emotions the receiver deals with in a crisis communication online setting. Those two emotions are anger and fear. Depending on which the receiver of the information feels, their process to re-share information online changes. If the receiver of the information experiences anger, they will follow heuristic information processing and they will more than likely rely on information from credible sources, leaders, and professional media. They will research on their own, consider the source, and dive into more information on the subject. However, the exact opposite is true for the receivers who experience fear. The fear driven receivers will base their information and make judgements on information with very little or no credible source. They will not check sources or research for themselves. What they see based on fear, must be true, and therefore compelled to re-share online (p. 104). After

the revolt of Facebook employees refusal to take down certain moderated content, Fish (2020) states that more fact checking accountability is needed on social media platforms to begin understanding the difference between real and fake news. Starbird (2020) claims that a mix of false and true information online is even difficult for those who run online platforms. It is getting tougher and tougher to distinguish fact from fiction online. “And this challenge is not getting any easier as efforts to understand and respond to COVID-19 get caught up in the political machinations of this year’s presidential election” (2020, pp.4). Social media receivers respond with very different, challenging and unpredictable behaviors by how the receiver uses their emotion to interpret what they see and hear online.

Emotional Contagion

Lu and Huang (2018) explain that these fear driven receivers play into “emotional contagion” then spreads like wildfire:

It is inevitable given the present media context that organizational crises will receive exposure, discussion, and even escalation online. Given the strong potential for online emotional contagion to produce large-scale collective emotions, greater attention should be paid to emotional contagion in the digital environment during organizational crises. When the public scans crisis news online, they are probably more influenced by others’ online forwards and comments than by official PR statements or journalistic work. (p. 4-5).

In their research, they explain two main paths the receiver of online information may go on: condition-oriented and emotional-oriented patterns (See Figure 1A). Even though, both receiver

groups read, hear, and see the same information, the way they interpret the information via their feelings, turns out how they process information, and re-share. Strong emotions may arise quickly with instant gratification the online social platforms provides, thus causing a quicker crisis than ever before. Harkaway (2018) claims that “Social media is a reactive form of communication in which everything is instantaneous and responses immediate” (pp.4). Action/reaction in terms of online news sharing is a quick emotional response, not cognitive and rational. Research shows that most social media sites act as both broadcasting and social networking sites in one. Having both in one social media platform contributes to the SCC. The broadcasting aspect gives the power to the receiver to share the secondary crisis communication with all their contacts (network) immediately, thus, giving the receiver influence in their social networking circle through the use of re-broadcasting (Zheng et al., 2018, p.57). Power, emotion, and influence are all in the hands of the receiver of the news information.

Instant Gratification

Harkaway (2018) explains that instant gratification muddles the line between quickness and accuracy. Quickly writing messages on their screens, the receiver can put their thoughts, emotions, and feelings quickly online without even thinking cognitively about the consequences. However, by quick responding online, it usually has a downfall. The downfall being anxiously waiting for a response just as quickly as the one they shared online. After hitting “send” he/she is anxious for a reply if a response is not given within a few minutes. The message expects just as quick as a response. As Harkaway explains “As the recipient is aware of the ‘social protocol’ of a quick response. He/she typically replies in short order — often providing a ‘timely response’ al-

beit without sufficient weight. Contemplation is sacrificed for speed.” (pp. 9). Quick response, therefore loses the need for accuracy, contemplation, and thought. Quick and instant gratification is emotional driven and not cognitive driven.

Lu and Huang (2018) claim that the only way to deflate the secondary lack of factual communication is to not rely on the emotional response, but the cognitive behavioral response to the information (p. 102). Hanson (2019) states that instead of media outlets being an “audience of sheep-like mass of receiver son messages” the instant gratification theory views that the viewers are “active receivers of information of their own choosing” (p.45). The receivers make up their mind on what they want to view and hear, and then make a decision to “share” or “like” whether its good, bad, or irrelevant news.

Emotional Responses

Botha’s (2014) research with viral political satire campaigns explained that the greater the emotional intensity in a viral video, the greater influencing power it has to be “liked” or “shared.” Emotion effects the response and reaction of the receiver in an online setting. Emotion and intensity spreads online content. Lu and Huang (2018) explained that when there is high emotional intensity, it effects their behavioral pattern. High intensity tiggers crisis behaviors and low intensity involves a lack of emotional behavioral response to the online situation. Research has shown that there is an important link in the emotion-to-behavior patterns in crisis communication settings. “In such situations, if an organization does not take emotions into consideration when communicating with its publics, it may fail to alleviate crisis severity or even evaluate it properly. This error in judgment may ultimately cause a failure of crisis communication strate-

gies.” (p. 103). Failure to evaluate emotions in an online setting can be detrimental to the media organization or news outlet as a whole. Hocker and Wilmot state that emotions are indeed facts and must be evaluated to be understood in an interpersonal conflict (2018). They state that people identify strongly with emotional states that “we cannot separate what we ‘feel’ from who we are, at least in that particular moment” (p.195). Therefore, if social media’s emotional response to an organization isn’t taken seriously, the online followers will not feel as if they are being listened to or of any importance.

Selectively Bias

The bias from the social media receivers emotions matters a great deal during a SCC because that bias may lead to negative attitudes about the organization as a whole (Lu & Huang, 2018). If the receivers emotional bias tiggers a share storm of information, whether its information is full of facts or fiction almost becomes irrelevant. The “like” or “share” could negatively impact not just the news, but the trust the public has in the media profession as a whole. Zheng et al. (2018) claims that the receivers who believe their own bias to be popular will express and share their views more often online that the receivers who believe their bias are the minority (p. 58). The receiver’s opinions and bias in social networking circles almost seems to outweigh fact from fiction online. Zheng et al. (2018) explains that the spiral of silence theory comes into play in these situations in an online environment. The minority of the opinion sharing the information believes their opinions are different that the one sharing the information, they remain silent online. The research goes on to state that:

[W]e expect that if the public feels their perceived violation during a crisis is shared by others on social media, they are more likely to engage in SCC. On the other hand, if they perceive others do not feel as violated as they do, they are less likely to post SCC on their social media pages. Therefore, we hypothesize that social media opinion climate strengthens the positive relationship perceived violation and secondary crisis communication. (p. 59).

The minority bias believes that in not sharing their opinions or news articles online that they are alone because so much of their social media circle is posting the opposite bias online. The spiral of silence avoids what may quickly become an online “I’m right/Are not/Am too” identity driven dispute (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018, p. 95). Zheng et al. (2018) research results show that the receiver will more likely post or re-share their opinions online when they believe they have support for their opinions (p.61). Hanson (2019) states “while the spiral of silence is a fascinating explanation of how public opinion functions, it is difficult to independently verify and prove whether it, in fact, works that way” (p. 48). He states that radical ideas may be shared simply because those people who feel deeply about an issue feel that they are correct. Hansons ideals from research the Pew Research Center did shows that social media outlets like Facebook or Twitter make people more likely share political ideas, and opinions online. McLuhan (1964) stated over half a century ago:

Today when we want to get our bearing in our own culture, and have the need to stand aside from the bias and pressure exerted by any technical form of humans

expression, we have only to visit a society where that particular form has not been felt. (p.9).

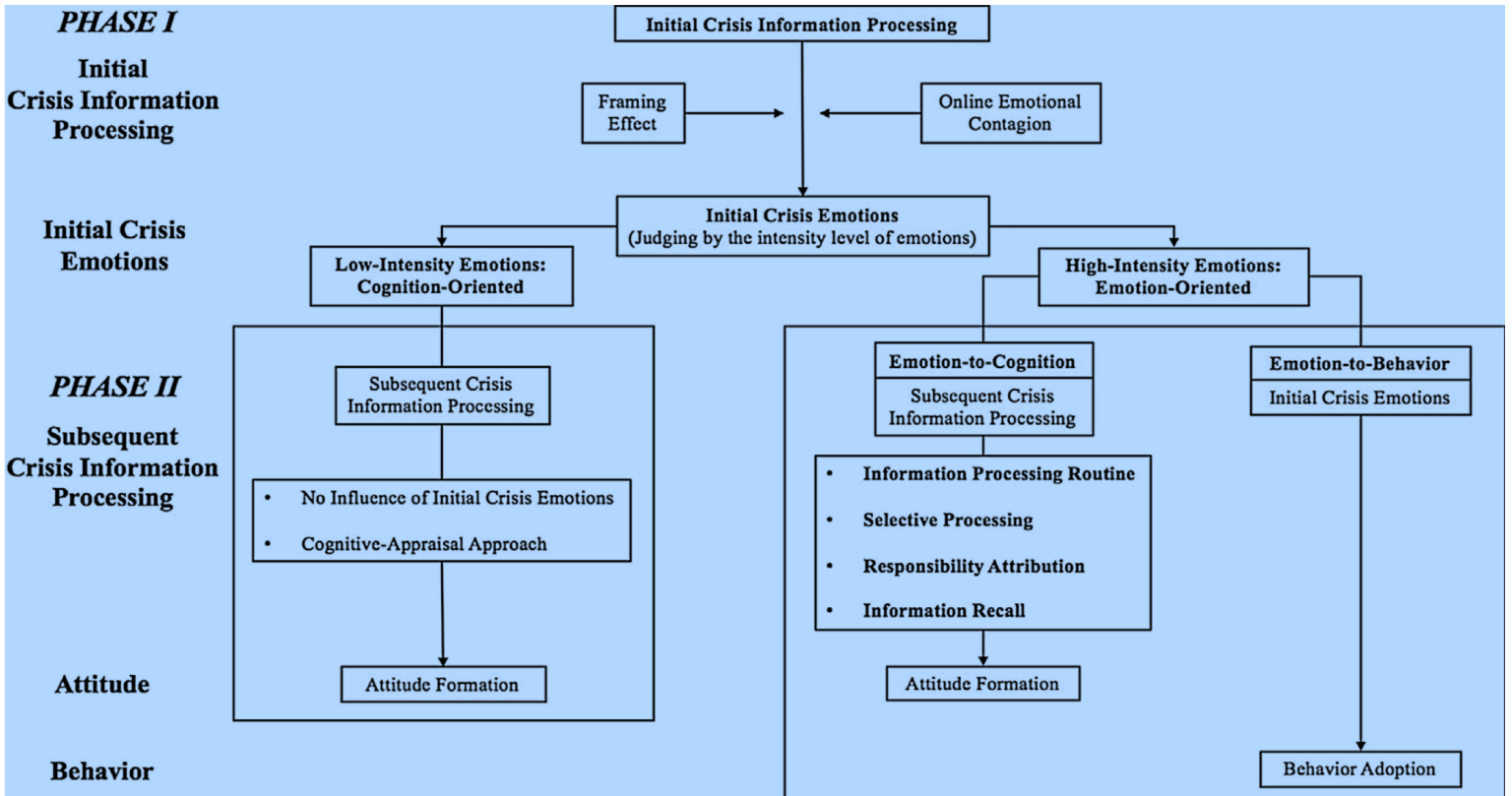
Perhaps, McLuhan understood that technology will always change and the interpersonal communication will also change because of the message in which we receive secondary crisis communication. Hanson (2019) states that everyone has been socialized differently and it is unpredictable to determine how some receivers perceive and interpret the media content (p. 33). Outcomes, such as instant gratification, human emotional behavior, and biases all play a huge role in the media message during a SCC such as COVID-19.

Conclusion

Technology changes and the way we communicate with each other changes daily. Social media is a means of receiving and sharing information, especially during the unprecedented times of lockdown that we currently face. The way we interpret emotionally and cognitively understand the information we see, and hear online determines whether we hit “like,” “share” put our own narrative on the information. Online news sharing has two main emotional responses: anger or fear (Lu and Huang, 2018). Secondary crisis communication in an online social media setting, we will respond most likely with a emotional-to-behavior response (Lu & Huang, 2018, Appendix 1A). Which emotional response the receiver chooses, determines if the share storm of accuracy or inaccurate news flows freely into the social media platforms. Starbird believes that during the current COVID-19 pandemic that an “infodemic” of “vast and complicated mix of information, misinformation, and disinformation” will only get more challenging leading up to the next election (2020 pp.1). Fish (2020) proposes more fact checking in a world of misinforma-

tion, deep fakes, and propaganda. With more than half Americans getting their news source from online social media platforms, the receiver should assess their emotions and think thoughtfully before reshaping information and re-sharing (Shearer & Matsu, 2018). In an unprecedented time such as COVID-19, emotional response, human behavior, instant gratification, and biases all play a huge role in the secondary crisis communication of online news information.

Appendix



1A

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