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## The Impact of Utilizing Social Media as a Communication Platform During a Crisis Within The Oil Industry

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to gather arguments and counterarguments about the effective use of various types of social media that an organization can use in crisis preparedness, response and recovery. This study focuses on various industries worldwide. British Petroleum (BP) case study as well related industrial case studies is the main methodology of this study; and qualitative methods was used as an approach for this study. Social media can be an effective tool in order to convey information and explain current issues to the public. Various types of social media play different roles with one main purpose, which is to disseminate information on an urgent basis and share it with a wide range of people. In a crisis, it is vital to plan a response and share information strategically via social media in order to control the information and avoid a worsening crisis. This also aims to reduce any potential tarnishing of the company's image, something which can easily occur as a result of poor communication with the public. The key limitation is that when secondary data such as an organisation's website and documentation are accessed, there is a risk that it may not be accurate or current. This study attempts to highlight the importance for industries practitioners to utilize social media as an effective platform as part of organization's crisis communication strategies.

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*Keywords:* Social media; crisis; crisis communication; crisis management; BP case studies; oil and gas industry

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### 1. Introduction

Portraying a positive image and maintaining a good reputation is arguably an important part of long term planning in every organization. By managing a crisis effectively and efficiently, the positive perceptions of stakeholders and the public are vital to an organization. An important strategy in managing a crisis is the use of various types of social media in order to communicate with the public to convey current information about an issue or crisis in the fastest and

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easiest way while building and maintaining the trust of and relationships with the stakeholders.

Nowadays, in crisis situations, technological advances are transforming and disseminating information to the affected communities in the fastest and easiest ways (Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011). These methods include micro blogging, blogs, social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, YouTube), video sharing, content-driven communities as well as professional networks (Walaski, 2013). During a crisis, it is important for an organization to communicate their response regarding the crisis with the organization's stakeholders (Modeus, Paulsson & Olsson, 2012). The effective and efficient communication of the crisis with the stakeholders will lessen negative perceptions and threats to the organization's reputation and image (Veil et al., 2011). The organization or individual who will be crisis communicators should comprehend, construct and deliver messages to the directly or indirectly affected stakeholders and crisis communicators and should also prepare to receive and respond to feedback from these audiences (Zaremba, 2010).

A lack of research in identifying the importance of social media as the most effective medium during a crisis has resulted in many companies deciding not to employ this crisis strategy (Goldfine, 2011). Therefore, this study will examine the importance of social media as a communication platform during a crisis and how various forms of social media play different roles in disseminating information to different audiences during a crisis. In effect, the paper will attempt to justify how to control the use of social media during a crisis. Through this study, key concepts such as crisis, crisis management, crisis communication and social media will be defined and explored with recent insight and overviews from academic practices in order to clarify the importance of why an organisation should consider social media as a crisis communication platform. Finally, this study demonstrates the best practice use of social media as a platform in a risk and crisis situation.

### *1.1 Research Objectives*

RO1: To identify the advantages and disadvantages of the use of social media as a communication platform during a crisis for an organization.

RO2: To determine the impact on the organization's reputation and image when utilizing social media as a platform during a crisis.

RO3: To identify the most effective form of social media that organization could use in reaching the affected public during a crisis.

### *1.2 Research Questions*

RQ1: What is the advantage and disadvantage of using social media as a communication platform during a crisis for an organization?

RQ2: What is the impact on the organization's reputation and image when utilizing social media as a platform during a crisis?

RQ3: What is the most effective form of social media that organization could use in reaching the affected public during a crisis?

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1 Crisis*

Bokhari (as cited by Eid & Fyfe, 2009) defined a crisis as "generally distinguished from routine situations by a sense of urgency and a concern that the problem will become worse in the absence of action". Crises inevitably endanger the reputation of an organization and crisis communication then becomes the central focus of a corporation (Barton, as cited by Muralidharan, Dillistone & Shin, 2011).

### *2.2 Crisis management*

Crisis management can be defined as the several ways an organization employs to prevent or reduce the impact of the crisis (Coombs, 2012, p. 5). During a crisis, it is important for an organization to communicate their response regarding the crisis with the organization's stakeholders (Modeus et al., 2012).

### *2.3 Social media*

Currie (as cited by Hysenlika, 2012) defined social media as “the various electronic tools, technologies, and applications that facilitate interactive communication and content exchange, allowing the user to move back and forth easily between the roles of the audience and content producers”. Social media is becoming such an integral part of business operations that its use is now commonplace for product launches, developing consumer loyalty and sharing news (Walaski, 2013).

### *2.4 The role of social media in crisis communication*

In a recent study, the new forms of social media such as Facebook, Twitter and so on were recognized as an organization's opportunity to lessen the impact in times of a crisis (Wendling, Radisch & Jacobzone, 2013). In the study, Wendling et al (2013) note that previously, radio, television, newspapers and other traditional media sources were used to transmit valuable information but nowadays social media such as Facebook and Twitter are tools which can assist an organization to disseminate and share information with as many people as possible while receiving feedback and responses from the public. This means that an organization employs the technology of social media as part of the communication process to the world. The continuous use of social media as a tool seems likely for the foreseeable future (Anderson & Rainie, 2010).

### *2.5 Organization and social media during a crisis*

Organizations that are sensitive to changes and usage of technology and the internet constantly use Twitter, blogs, mobile phones and other social network tools to spread the news of the crisis (Pang, Hassan & Chong, 2014). On the other hand, Schultz, Utz and Goritz (2011) identify that blogs are effective tools for repairing an organization's image and reputation while preventing a boycott in crisis situations. In order to do so, Jin and Liu (2010) have proposed the blog-mediated crisis communication model in order to help an organisation or crisis communicators to monitor the blogosphere and respond appropriately to influential bloggers during a crisis. This aims to avoid inaccurate information from the public especially bloggers spreading bad news, which can cause the tarnishing of an organisation's reputation and image. Liu (2010) stated that during a crisis period, people seek immediate and in-depth crisis information in contrast with Stephens & Malone (2009) who claim that people usually tend to rely on word of mouth by using social media instead of searching for information directly from a corporate website or blogs. They argue that this is because blogs just tend to allow people to engage in knowledge sharing, reflection and the exchange of views, which normally encourages the public for the purpose of readership and builds trust after a crisis (Boulus et al, as cited by Valentini & Romenti, 2011). Thus, during a crisis, people tend to seek and use various types of social media to gather as much additional information as possible regarding the risks and responsibilities of the crisis (Valentini & Romenti, 2011).

In addition, Facebook has more than one billion users worldwide (Hysenlika, 2012), which represent the most popular social media site. Hysenlika (2012) claimed that Facebook allows communicators (individual or organisation) to deliver messages based on their needs quickly and effectively during a crisis period. This can be proved by Energex (Australia), an organization that successfully communicated and shared information with the public by using social media tools. Energex provided and offered a social media networking page on Facebook for the purpose of sharing information including power interruptions, safety and storm information, energy saving tips, sponsorship opportunities and community initiatives, invitations to provide feedback on specific issues as well as informing the public of new content on the digital channels (Energex, n.d.). Thus, social media can be an effective communication platform not only to be used to reduce the crisis impact but also as a tool to share knowledge and the management of a crisis by an organisation (Yates & Paquette, 2011).

## 2.6 Social media platforms.

Social media platforms include blogs, virtual communities, social networking, collaborative tagging and media file sharing sites such as YouTube and Flickr (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Social media's capacity is designed to enable people to connect, share and collaborate, which has resulted in its increasing use in personal, business and educational domains (White, King & Tsang, 2011). Walaski (2013) supports the study stating that social media platforms and methods include micro blogging, blogs, social networking sites which are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and also YouTube.

Nowadays, a variety of social media platforms enable organisations to provide information about a crisis effectively because they represent the new way of communicating: digital, computerised and communication technology that allows networking in the fastest and most efficient ways to different audiences simultaneously (White, 2012). Social media has the potential to influence the manner in which individuals think, behave and respond to information and situations in general in times of crises (Paul, as cited by Schroeder & Pennington-Gray, 2014).

The role of social media as a communication platform during a crisis is important and unavoidable (Schroeder et al., 2013). Social media can be useful to improve preparedness and responses, reduce the cost of disasters, improve transparency of decisions and also increase the potential acceptance of outcomes (Wendling et al., 2013). Indeed, social media can be one of the primary crisis communication strategies during a disaster (Cho & Park, 2013). A recent study by Axel (2014) shows how the different types of social media are important in ensuring effective crisis communication in their capacity to provide the right information at the right time to the right people (Lecenciuc & Nagy, 2008).

## 3. Research Methodology

In this study, various industrial case studies will be focused on. Great-Quake Tsunami (2011) used Twitter to disseminate and share information and emergency procedures with their employees when the earthquake occurred. This media platform was used by the Japanese authorities to plan rescue operations, fundraise and provide emotional support to the victims and their families (Cho, Jun & Park, 2013). On 13 March 2011, the government started a Twitter page in Japanese and on 16 March 2011 a Twitter page in English in order to disseminate important emergency procedures should the disaster reoccur (Wendling et al., 2013).

Twitter was also successfully used to share and update the latest information with the public during the 2007 and 2008 California wildfires, the 2008 Mumbai massacre, the 2009 crash of the US Airways Flight 1549, the 2010 Haiti earthquake and the 2011 Tunisian uprising (Beaumont et al., as cited by Veil et al, 2011). During the Haiti earthquake in 2010, Twitter served as an effective communication platform with the public especially for emergency communication (Auer, 2011). Besides, the Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport used Twitter to provide information about safety tips, flight status updates and safety action for passengers when tornadoes struck in the area in April, 2012 (Paul, as cited by Schroeder & Pennington-Gray, 2014).

The manner in which Twitter can help organisations communicate and disseminate information with the public during a crisis was also demonstrated during two recent natural disasters: the January 2011 floods in Brisbane and South East Queensland and the February 2011 earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand (Flew et al., 2013). Energy organizations such as Energex (Australia) have also received positive feedback from people who have praised the way in which they communicated effectively using social media. Energex has established a social media networking page on Facebook for the purpose of sharing information including power interruptions and safety and storm information (Energex, n.d.).

Therefore, in accordance with the case studies above, it is evident that social media can be an effective tool not only for reducing the impact of a crisis but also to share knowledge and the management of a crisis (Yates & Paquette, 2011). This has been supported by a recent study from Wendling et al (2013) who stated that the new forms of social media such as Facebook and Twitter were recognised as an organisation's opportunity to lessen the impact in times of a crisis as well sharing knowledge and information.

Malaysia Airlines (MAS) has been criticised by the public as well as public relations practitioners across the globe who claim that the organisation failed to utilise social media during a crisis (Petrolino, 2014). Following the disappearance of Flight MH370, it has been alleged that MAS wrongly utilised social media to provide information to

grieving, only using short text messages (Petrolino, 2014). It has been claimed that this did not take the families' grief into consideration. In this digital age, even though all MAS' social media channels were used consistently during the crisis, specifically Twitter, Facebook and Google+, MAS made no effort to ensure its social media communications were part of the online conversation streams during the crisis (Pownall, 2014).

Meanwhile, the shipping line, Carnival Corporation's image and reputation has also been harmed after the Costa Concordia disaster. Carnival Corporation has been criticised by many including public relations practitioners following their late initial response to the disaster, only posting on Facebook and Twitter six days after the disaster happened (The Realtime Report, 2012). Carnival Corporation also failed to use social media to disseminate and communicate the details of the incident to the public following their decision to go silent on social networks. To be sure, the company missed a huge opportunity to interact with the public (The Realtime Report, 2012). They did not take into account that nowadays, globalisation and technological advances have resulted in the public being more mindful and aware of a crisis (Eid & Fyfe, 2009) and look towards social media for information.

Other organisations which failed to use social media during a crisis are Taco Bell and Dominos. During the recent photo prank crisis, Taco Bell did not release any statements in response to comments on Facebook (Agnes, 2013). Further, Taco Bell did not respond to customers demanding a response on social media during the crisis. Similarly, Dominos neglected to respond via the social media network during the hygiene crisis which was widely posted on YouTube. It could be argued that this has tarnished their reputation and credibility (Agnes, 2012). Due to this failure to utilise social media to offer clarification to its stakeholders during times of crisis, Taco Bell and Dominos have received negative public feedback.

As a result, it is important for an organisation to utilise and understand the importance of using social media during a crisis. This is because technological advances are transforming how crisis management professionals and researchers view, interact with and disseminate information to affected communities in a crisis situation (Veil et al., 2011). Social media has become the most common platform for the public to access crisis information compared to other forms of media (Jin, Liu & Austin, 2014).

Apart from its establishment and success, BP has also been linked to a number of oil crises that have affected the reputation and image of the company. Such crises include when BP's Texas City Refinery exploded and caught fire on March 23, 2005, the oil spill in Alaska in 2006 and also the Gulf of Mexico oil spill on April 16, 2010 (Wolf and Mejri, 2013). Crises confronted by BP not only have an environmental impact but also have human, legal, reputational and financial repercussions. The Gulf of Mexico spill received worldwide coverage due to the resulting deaths of eleven people as well as many injuries (BP global, n.d.a). Moreover, marine scientists predict that consequences from the oil spill have resulted in the damage of ecosystems and economic damage, which could take decades to recover (National Academy of Sciences, 2010 & Red Orbit, 2013). BP has been criticised by the various parties concerned in the crisis, including environmentalists, public relations practitioners and journalists, who have said that the organisation failed to communicate with their stakeholders during the crisis which resulted in the tarnishing of the organisation's image and reputation (Wolf and Mejri, 2013).

In the Gulf of Mexico oil spill disaster, poor management and a communication failure caused the oil disaster (Goldenberg, 2010). This was revealed during a BBC2 interview with the CEO of BP, Tony Hayward who mentioned that BP failed to prepare a contingency plan for the Gulf oil disaster and called the disaster "demonized and vilified". Moreover, BP failed to express their empathy towards victims and other stakeholders (Wolf & Mejri, 2013). BP has also been criticised by President Barack Obama and other stakeholders who have said that the organisation should focus on clean-up efforts and on compensating victims instead of spending money launching a print ads campaign (Wolf & Mejri, 2013).

#### 4. Analysis

As a well-established organization, BP should focus on using the best communication platform to communicate with stakeholders during a crisis. Traditional media such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines, newsletters and other print publications have been used widely by public relation practitioners before social media emerged in today's world and are still be used by public relation practitioners for certain events and issues (Grünig, 2013). However, in

this era of globalization that demands people have quick access to accurate and relevant information, social media is the best way to ensure a company's image and reputation is aligned to its goals (White, 2012).

It is evident that using social media during a crisis is an effective way of safeguarding a company's reputation. During the oil spill crisis in the Gulf of Mexico, which has been seen as the largest maritime disaster in US history (Wolf & Mejri, 2013), BP was criticised by many for their failure to address and respond to the public (Wolf & Mejri, 2013). From the outset it is clear that BP did not make full use of social media to communicate with the public. This is evident in the lack of regular updates and tweets on its social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook (Lacombe, 2010). BP also released their initial tweet regarding the oil spill disaster a full seven days after the initial crisis. Apparently, the BP America account has 52 tweets in total which is equal to one tweet per week since its inception in April 2009 (Lacombe, 2010). It could be argued that BP has overlooked the effective use of social media, which could have been effective in serving as a platform for a global audience to voice their concerns (Lacombe, 2010). Roger (2012), in her research, stated that BP should have reacted more quickly on social media during the oil spill in order to respond to and engage the public who were concerned and seeking accurate information.

#### 4.1 *Social media and messages*

Agnes (2012) explained that social media can be successful during a crisis when three major factors are taken into account: the message content, the delivery channel and the frequency of the message delivery. When using social media as a platform to communicate during a crisis, the message that the organisation sends should consider many aspects including who will read it and their response to it. The message needs to stay in-line with the organisation's goals and policy and needs to be honest, informative and sincere.

Message content is important in that it can result in disseminating correct and incorrect information, closing the gap between what the audience knows and what it needs to know (Walaski, 2011). Besides, the right message will help an organisation influence others with a different audience profile (Walaski, 2011). During the BP oil spill disaster, BP should have sent well-planned messages that would share accurate information with its stakeholders. Every level of stakeholders would need to receive the message in order to reduce the impact of the crisis. The urgency of providing reliable information to the public is acute during a crisis (Freberg, 2012). Freberg (2012) in his study stated that the viral spread of information on social media could be viewed as an advantage to a crisis professional who must reach the public as quickly as possible.

#### 4.2 *Appropriate segmentation.*

The success of social media depends on a well-planned adoption of the right approach to reach audiences as well as research of other organisation's experiences (Walaski, 2013). This is because different audiences have different expectations content and frequency. Segmentation is essentially a classification exercise, in which individuals are believed to be related in certain ways (Shaw, 2011). The statistics in section 2 show that 81 per cent of households have internet access, represented by all ages and categories. A global study of social media usage by UM Social Media Tracker Wave (2010) found that almost 75% of the active Internet universe use online social networking sites (Singh et al., 2012). This shows that BP would be in the position to reach a wide range of people using social media during a crisis. Palenchar (2011) supports the argument in his study by explaining that social media can be an organisation's best practice in terms of risk and communication because social media offers openness, participation, conversation and connectedness with communities. (Mayfield, 2008), allowing it to reach a wide range of people without involving the traditional media (Palenchar, 2011).

However, in every crisis faced by BP, the organisation has segmented the public according to the social media channel it deems most appropriate. Based on the statistics above, BP should consider using Facebook and Twitter as the best means for crisis communication because the figure from the statistics shows that Facebook has more than one billion monthly active users worldwide (Hysenlika, 2012). By segmenting its public to appropriate and convenient social media, information regarding the crisis can be delivered to the correct audience in a timely manner. Valentini and Romenti (2011) support the argument stating that during a crisis, people tend to seek and use several forms of social media to gather as much additional information as possible.

The example of the Carnival Corporation crisis has proved that making the decision to keep silent on social media resulted in bad perceptions and tarnishing the organisation's image and credibility. Stakeholders, including those who are affected directly or indirectly by the crisis, tend to search for information on social media as it tends to have more

frequent updates (Auer, 2011).

#### 4.3 *BP and social media contingency plan*

Several organisations have benefited from utilising social media effectively during a crisis. Social media can be used to reduce risk in crisis communication as it is both collaborative and participatory (Wendling et al., 2013). Information such as the emergency plan and current status can be shared as well as relevant post-crisis updates. From the analysis, it can be concluded that by utilising social media for different audiences aligned in the crisis communication stages, BP would be in the position to share knowledge, but and lessen the impact of negative public feedback. Besides, it is also important for BP to maintain its reputation and image as well as build trust among its stakeholders when other crises arise in the future.

### 5. Recommendation and Conclusion

BP had neglected to harness social media to share information (Goldenberg, 2010) when compared to Japan who used social media as a wide reaching platform (Twitter) during the Great-Quake Tsunami (2011) disaster. In order to avoid tarnishing the organisation's image through negative feedback due to a communication failure such as in the case of MAS Airlines, Taco Bell and Dominos, it is recommended that this well-known and established oil and gas company make effective use of social media to reach stakeholders in a crisis. This is evident in the research and analysis in the previous section and includes utilising social media during pre-crisis, during and post-crisis to reduce the impact on the organisation's image and reputation. Based on the statistics of active monthly social network users, it is also recommended that BP use and update current information and news via Facebook and Twitter in order to reach a wide range of people on a timely basis.

However, the content of the messages should be well-planned, structured, controlled and to the point to avoid any miscommunication as well to ensure that the message is achievable (Agnes, 2012). Besides, BP should identify its audience segmentation based on the social media most used in order to deliver the message as well as to explain the crisis in the fastest way. BP should prepare a social media contingency plan that is aligned with crisis plan stages in order to avoid any uncontrolled information. This is because, in order to utilise social media as a platform to communicate, all the information should be controlled by the organisation as well as the audiences it reaches (Wendling et al., 2013).

In this applied study, the key limitation is that when secondary data such as an organisation's website and documentation are accessed, there is a risk that it may not be accurate or current. Future research within another service industry such the airline or banking sector should be aligned with the government practice of utilising social media, Ethical issues regarding the use of social media in a crisis should also be considered to provide insight and generability as well as represent a whole service industry.

As a conclusion, the impact of utilising social media as a communication platform during an organisation's image and reputation is considerable and can build trust and positive relationships among its stakeholders. Using social media during a crisis not only benefits the affected public but is also of advantage to the organisation itself.

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