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Introduction to the special section on social media and the crisis lifecycle

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Editorial

Introduction to the special section on social media and the crisis lifecycle

Social media is uniquely situated to aid in many of the issues associated with crisis communication and related research. Moreover, it may provide unique tools for communication with adversely affected, disadvantaged, or marginalized publics throughout the crisis lifecycle. For the crisis scholar, social media provide an innovative tool to research audiences that often have no crisis knowledge, but social media may also represent frustration, as its proliferation has beget new challenges and obstacles. Individuals can use different social media platforms to seek information, communicate with others, provide information, and express emotion. Individuals, organizations, and government agencies now have the ability to communicate to specific audiences concerning risks and actions to take as they seek to meet informational needs. However, the unique ways in which social media has evolved and can be used to study extreme events has received limited research attention. Therefore, as a community of scholars, there is much to learn about social media throughout the crisis lifecycle.

In this special section, the communication implications of social media throughout the crisis lifecycle are explored from a variety of perspectives. The goal of this section is not to outline the most important questions that crisis scholars should be attempting to answer. Neither is it an attempt to indicate the directions where programmatic crisis research should move. Crisis scholarship is multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary, if you will, encompassing different fields of study, approaches, and theoretical orientations, therefore arguing for a singular research direction for crisis scholars is unrealistic. Moreover, at the writing of this special section, crisis scholarship is experiencing much attention and it appears that attention to the study of crisis will continue to grow. Therefore, the articles contained within this special section of *Computers in Human Behavior*, should be viewed as the beginning of a larger discussion on the ability, use, advantages, disadvantages, and best practices in using social media throughout the crisis lifecycle. A goal of this special section is that the articles promote continued research on social media and risk/crisis communication. The crisis community will be motivated to develop systematic programs of inquiry regarding its current use, success, failure, future directions, and best practices (Seeger, 2006).

1. Contributions of the special section

The articles in this special section explore a variety of communication processes and effects in the pre-crisis, crisis, and post crisis stages (Coombs, 2012). Information seeking has been called a hallmark of crisis (Spence et al., 2006) and information sharing can also

be a central focus. Brengarth and Mujkic examine how Web 2.0 applications were used as a communication tool by nonprofit organizations during a wildfire in the western United States. Getchell and Sellnow examined information and exchanges on Twitter during a water contamination crisis. These articles outline both the potential and problems concerning the use of Web 2.0 technologies in crisis communication. Kaewkitipong, Chen, and Ractham describe how various entities use social media to share knowledge throughout the crisis lifecycle. The study outlines how social media can be used to bridge information needs at different times of threat and recovery. Maresh-Fuehrer and Smith explain how social media mapping applications can be used for information acquisition and communication through the crisis lifecycle. Taken together, these articles demonstrate the powerful opportunity that accompanies the ability to share, promote and comment on crisis information. They also outline how the affordances of such media often go unused during crises.

In their article on the use of social media by universities, Omilion-Hodges and McClain demonstrate how organizational stakeholders, specifically first information responders, are willing participants in the information sharing process. An organization, through its relationships, has additional partnerships available during a crisis, which may help the organization in meeting its goal. Stewart and Wilson offer the STREMI model as a lens for the evaluation of social media crisis management. The authors examine Hurricane Sandy using the STREMI model and offer future directions for the model's implementation.

Crises and other extreme events not only create physical damage and result in loss of life, but also produce emotional reactions for those involved and countless others witnessing through various media. Pang and Ng examined emotive cues and information seeking as evidenced on Twitter following a riot in the cultural district of Singapore known as Little India. Similarly Lachlan et al., using the CERC model (Reynolds & Seeger 2005), examined the presence of actionable information available on Twitter in the days leading up to a major snowstorm. They note that Twitter content dealt more with affective orientation and that emergency management was largely absent from the conversation. Together these two articles outline the emotional function social media can serve, but also raise a number of new questions about the directions and use of similar technologies throughout the crisis lifecycle. Finally, Spence, Lachlan, and Rainear discuss the complexities and difficulties crises pose to the collection of data. They provide suggestions and outline the opportunities social media provide the crisis scholar.

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