

Crisis Management on Social Media: A framework*

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Abstract

Purpose. Scholars should investigate organization model of companies that successfully manage their Social Media presence, in every circumstance. The main purpose of our research is to provide a network perspective to the relevant topic of Social Media Crisis Management.

Methodology. Following an exploratory qualitative approach, Authors have conducted 5 in-depth interviews with key Informants (internal and external to the Company) designated to the task of “social media crisis management”, linked in a client/suppliers relationship. All the material has been reviewed through a content-analysis.

Findings. According to our preliminary research, many are the issues and the topics that companies and digital agencies/consultants must control in their collaboration to face a Social Media crisis. Even if the topic is compelling, many of those elements are unexpected and underestimate.

Practical implications. Managerial implications concern three different point of view: how companies and their suppliers interact in facing challenges online and how a network approach could be useful for Social Media Crisis Management.

Originality/value. From the best of our knowledge, this study could be the first in analysing how companies and agencies must be organized to face a crisis on Social Media. Moreover, it will allow investigating in an empiric way the sense making approach to the crisis management topic.

Keywords

Crisis management; social media; network management; multiple-case study

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1. Introduction

In the Web 2.0 crisis have become an inevitable, integral and permanent feature of the new Social Media panorama: crisis are no longer a rare or random element. The majority of Organizations are impacted daily by small and large crisis on the Social Media: companies and agencies need to learn, very fast, how recognize, prevent and manage crisis, to lessen their impact on corporate reputation and main assets. On the other hand, the vast majority of organizations and institutions have not been designed to anticipate and deal with Social Media crises once they have occurred. Social Media crises are so different from the previous ones that the management and the executives of most organizations still do not understand the set of skills required to head off crises. Nevertheless, Social Media crisis management appears as an under-studied topic and an emerging issue in crisis management studies (Laufer, 2015): moreover, literature has mostly focused attention on the communication aspects.

Social Media crisis has had a very important impact not only in terms of customer's perspective, but also on the way companies work and relate with their network, like communication Agencies and Consultants. Both Academics and Practitioners have increased their interest in this topic in recent years. During a crisis, companies are faced with many urgent decisions, and many players (internal and external to the Company) are involved. In this process, as pointed out by Lemon and Verhoef (2016) literature has made very little progress in explaining how Organizations can manage the entire customer journey and experience in a network perspective to reduce uncertainty. Many are the issues and the topics that companies and agencies must control in their collaboration to face a Social Media crisis: the main purpose of our research is to provide a network perspective (Company/Digital Agency or Consultant) to the relevant topic of Social Media Crisis Management.

This paper begins with a literature review on Crisis and Social Media. The method and the main findings of this study are then discussed, and possible future directions for this area of research are suggested. Some conclusions and managerial implications are also outlined.

The results of this study contribute to the existing literature on Social Media Crisis management with its network approach, linking Social Media crisis and sense-making theoretical framework in organizational crisis.

2. Literature review

The academic literature about Social Media crisis usually addresses issue related to Communication Management and Marketing debate (Aula, 2010; Grégoire, Salle, & Tripp, 2015; Lin, Spence, Sellnow, & Lachlan, 2016; Alves, Fernandes, & Raposo, 2016), and to the best of our knowledge there are no studies that frame Social Media crisis in the literature about sense-making in organizational crisis (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick, 1988, 2010). Beside most of the studies that addressed Social Media crisis focused on communications' and public relations' best-practices to manage the crisis (e.g. Grégoire et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2016).

With this study we aim to approach the issue of Social Media crises with the theoretical framework derived from literature about sense-making in crisis management (Kayes, 2004; Weick, 1988; Wicks, 2001) and we propose that Social Media crises can also be studied under a managerial point of view in order to enhance the overall comprehension of the phenomenon and the possible organizational aspects involved in it.

A definition of organizational crisis can be found in Harmann (1963) study in which he states that organizational crisis "(1) threatens high-priority values of the organization (2) presents a restricted amount of time in which a response can be made, and (3) is unexpected

or unanticipated” (p. 64). Some years later other researchers addressed the same model reframing it in a more perceptive way (Billings, Milburn, & Schaalman, 1980).

Both these conceptualization are quite deterministic in considering the organizational decision-makers behaviour in crisis, then another point of view emerges in this debate suggesting that crises are not a so deterministic processes: in particular the study of Weick about enacted sense-making in crisis’ situations (1988). The main idea of Weick is that organizational decision-makers have to act in order to clarify the problem, in an unknown situation they have to start actioning, gain feedback, and learn, but their actions may result in a better-off or in a worsening of the crisis (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick, 1988).

Also the more recent definition derived from the review of crisis management literature delineates some similarities with the sense-making approach to crisis. In fact Pearson and Claire define organizational crisis as “low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly” (1998, p. 60).

The characteristics of recent cases of Social Media crises (Aula, 2010; Grégoire et al., 2015; Ott & Theunissen, 2015) suggest us the importance to addresses the issue under a sense-making theoretical approach given that Social Media crisis can be considered a sort of sub-set of organizational crisis.

Social Media play a threefold role in crisis firstly (1) they can be considered tools to manage communication crisis (e.g. Formentin, Bortree, & Fraustino, 2017; Ye & Ki, 2017), then (2) they could amplify and increase the resonance of a crisis (Zhao, 2017), and finally (3) they could be the cause themselves of a crises (Ott & Theunissen, 2015)..

The first element which diversifies Social Media crises from other types of organizational crises concerns the so-called “triggering events” of the crisis (Weick, 1988; Zyglidopoulos & Phillips, 1999).

The “triggering events” usually considered in organizational crisis management typically involve severe consequences such as loss of human lives (Vaughan, 1996; Weick, 1993).

On the contrary Social Media crises can often be the consequence of not really severe “triggering events”, instead the events that can cause a storm of criticism on Social Media, could be considered “innocuous” (Ott & Theunissen, 2015).

In our study we want to develop a multiple cases of Social Media crises in order to address the issue under a sense-making lens and to unpack the roles of different organizational actors involved in the crisis management.

3. Methodology

In the words of Yin (1994, p. 136), the multiple-case study strategy “is most likely to be appropriate for “how” and “why” questions”. A case study design was chosen for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the multiple-case method can collect data from different data sources and organizations, creating the potential for a more complete understanding of organisational phenomena (Eisenhardt, 1989); more over it allows the researchers to collect “rich”, detailed information across a wide range of dimensions about either one particular case or a small number of cases (Daymon & Holloway, 2002). Secondly, the multiple-case method is considered as a useful basis for theory generation (Stake 1994), and finally, the case method is proposed as an appropriate methodology where limited previous academic research exists (Hutchinson, Quinn & Alexander, 2006).

For case studies, five components of a research design are especially important:

1. a study’s questions;

2. its propositions, if any;
3. its unit(s) of analysis;
4. the logic linking the data to the propositions; and
5. the criteria for interpreting the findings.

In this study we aim to collect semi-structured interviews with key Informants (internal and external to the Company) designated to the task of “social media crisis management”, linked in a client/suppliers relationship, and in line with the recommended range of data collection methods for multiple-case development (Yin, 2003).

We will analyze the empirical material with a Grounded Theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 2006), which are recommended as particularly appropriate to under-developed research areas, because of an open approach to extracting themes from the data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002).

4. Expected contribution

When talking about social media management, it’s quite common to observe the inter-organizational relationship between the actor to which the social profile is related (below, “the organization”) and the actor that is responsible for managing the process involved in that social media presence (below, “the agency”).

Our work sheds light on the nature and implications of this intra-organizational relationship, by understanding what role is played by these two actors in the sense making of a social media crisis

Given the theoretical nature of this research, we will conclude this paper by introducing a framework that is eventually capable to break down analytically into separate elements the whole process of sense making.

The framework is structured as follows. First of all, we consider the general agreement within the partnership between the organization and the agency is managed. We are interested in such an agreement because it influences several aspects, such as 1) the social media websites that will be garrisoned, 2) topics that will be discussed and 3) frequency of posting on the chosen touchpoints of the social media surface.

Secondly, the framework describes the interaction between the two parties when the crisis is taking place, specially regarding the two main phases that we expect to find: 1) detection of the “early signs” of a crisis and 2) definition (and execution) of a crisis management strategy.

Regarding the *Detection of the “early signs” of a crisis*, we expect to find a gradual, emerging process that can be metaphorically described as a “fire”: from a weak flame, a vaster blaze can be generated. Detection of a crisis is therefore a process made of two components: 1) detection and assessment of the destructive potential of a new flame 2) evaluation of the actual need for “increasing water” that avoids the fire to spread and to become uncontrolled. On a daily and real situation, it is complicated to “make sense” of the early warning signs of a crisis in undisguised situation of crisis (Weick, 1988, 1993, 2010), because even the previous experience gained by the brand in managing its social media presence is not ultimately capable to classify as a “flame” some negative comments or an increasing number of contents sharing.

Regarding the second phase that is described within the framework, namely *Definition (and execution) of a crisis management strategy*, we hypothesize that, once the crisis is detected, the inter-organizational team (agency plus organization) formalizes a crisis management strategy, namely a code of conduct that will be applied “from now on” in order to produce new pieces of content that are supposed to cool down the dominant organization-antagonist narrative that is burning within the crisis. The management strategy is therefore an

evolving combination of a “general posture that the organization decides to have while facing the crisis” and “a particular micro-management of every single piece of content”. The team will jointly take a decision on how involve itself in the conversations that are taking place on social media (i.e. by choosing whether or not managing all the pieces of contents, or only the “most dangerous” ones).

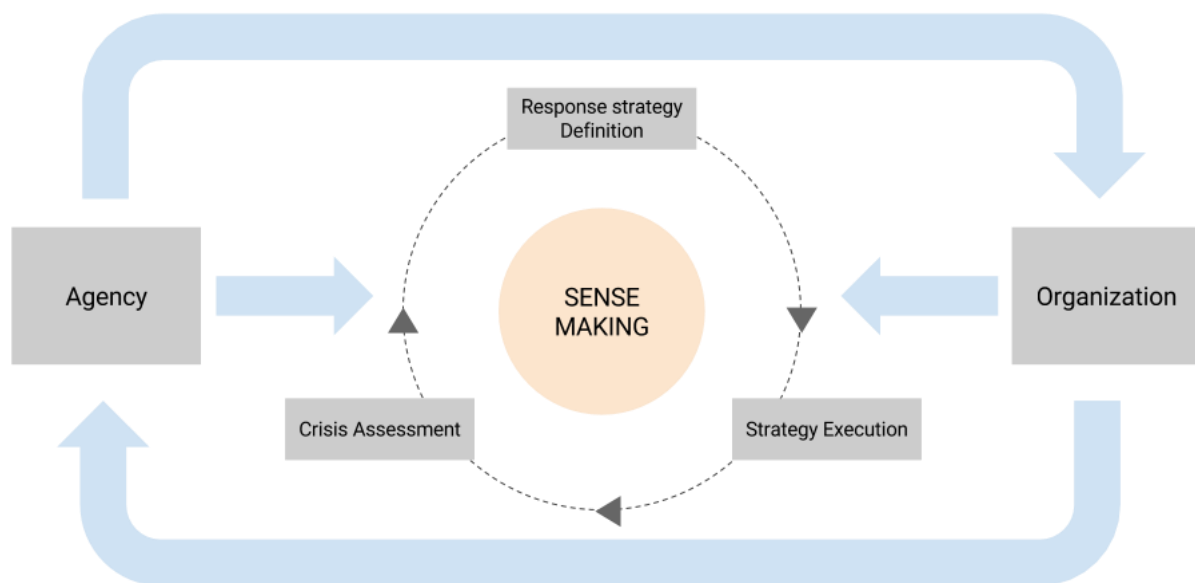
During this phase of the crisis management, since its nature of “skilled actor”, the agency plays a dual role: one the one hand, it translates the general strategy to a micro-level, namely made of all the pieces of contents that are produced in behalf of the organization on social media. One the other hand, by acquiring new knowledge on the antecedents and consequences of the crisis, the agency makes more sense of the crisis and has the chance to share the new knowledge with the organizations. A “dance of sense-making” between agency and organization takes place while the crisis is handled.

The organization is not merely a passive-spectator of this performance, since it has an active role in validating the strategy execution handled by the agency, but it is definitively ousted from the micro management of the conversations (which is indeed tolerated in a “standard” scenario).

The crisis management strategy is therefore refined as well as a new piece is added to the “crisis puzzle” - which is the aim of the collective sense-making process.

The process goes on until the crisis ends, namely when there is a decreasing attention on the topic of the crisis (see Fig. 1)

Fig. 1 - The inter-organizational Sense Making of a Social Media Crisis Management



This framework aims to contribute to Social Media crisis literature, constituted for the most part by theoretical approaches linked to communication management and public relations, shedding some light on the managerial side of the issue.

The usefulness of the proposed theoretical framework (based on the sense-making literature) emerges particularly in both the crisis detection and crisis management phases.

Since this is only a theoretical work, further empirical studies are needed in order to assess the potential of this framework and the whole set of variables that should be taken into account in order to describe in detail the relationship between organization and agency in the sense making a of a crisis.

Besides the limitation of the study, its implications about how actors manage the interpersonal and inter-team relationship during crisis detection phase can potentially enlighten some best practices able to support collective sense-making in crisis situation. Then also in the crisis management phase actors have to continually interact with contacts “every few minutes” in order to make sense of crisis and of the best solution among the multiple possible behaviors that they can adopt on Social Media.

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