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Stay calm and tweet: a best practice approach to the use of social media in a crisis situation

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STAY CALM AND TWEET:
A BEST PRACTICE APPROACH TO THE USE
OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN A CRISIS SITUATION

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Mass Communication

in

The Manship School of Mass Communication

by
Elizabeth Barrow Tadie
B.A., Louisiana State University, 2003
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
LIST OF TABLES	v
ABSTRACT.....	vi
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of Purpose	2
Organizational Crises Then and Now	3
2 LITERATURE REVIEW	7
Defining Crisis Communication	7
Public Relations Theories and Crisis Response	11
Theory of Issues Management	13
Theory of Image Restoration	15
Social Media in the 21 st Century.....	18
Case Studies: A Notable Positive and Negative Crisis Response	20
Summary and Research Questions	25
3 METHODS	27
Qualitative Research: Interviews	27
Participant Selection	28
Institutional Review Board Approval	30
The Interview Process.....	31
Data Analysis	31
4 RESULTS	34
Research Question One: Are Practitioners Incorporating Social Media Into Their Crisis Communication Plan(s)?	34
Research Question Two: Are Practitioners Using Social Media During a Crisis Communication Situation?	39
Research Question Three: How Do Practitioners Use Social Media in a Crisis Communication Situation?	41
Immediacy.....	41
Engagement.....	43
Brand Loyalty	43
Time Constraints.....	45
Research Question Four: Do Demographic Differences in Practitioners Play a Role in the Use of Social Media in a Crisis Communication Situation?	46
Research Question Five: Do Organizational Types Play a Role in the Use of Social Media in a Crisis Communication Situation?	50
Practitioner's Crisis Communication Plans	51

Summary	53
5 DISCUSSION	54
Relationship of the Current Study to Prior Research	54
Theoretical Implications of the Study	57
Conclusion	59
Limitations of the Study	60
Recommendations for Future Research	61
Professional Application to Using Social Media in a Crisis	61
Social Media and PR Practitioners	62
One Voice through One Monitor	62
Proactive through Social Media.....	63
Incorporate Social Media Now	63
Summary	64
6 REFERENCES	65
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	73
APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM	74
APPENDIX C: APPLICATION FOR EXEMPTION FROM INSTITUTIONAL OVERSIGHT	76
VITA	80

LIST OF TABLES

Table One: List of Interviewed Participants	29
Table Two: Participant Response to Incorporation of Social Media in Crisis Plan(s)	35
Table Three: Participant Familiarity with Social Media	47

ABSTRACT

At some point in its history every organization will face a crisis situation. How an organization responds to a crisis incident decides its survival. As Internet technology flourishes, public relations practitioners are provided with additional tools to manage crisis situations. This study investigates the role that emerging social media components play in the field of crisis management. It presents a best practice approach to using new technology in times of emergency.

A qualitative study of Louisiana public relations practitioners analyzes how and why social media is being integrated into crisis communication plans. Social media components are used to quickly communicate succinct messages and promote two-way symmetrical communication in times of crisis. Social media's role in the theories of issues management and image restoration is explored and incorporated.

This study contributes to the literature on crisis communication and social media in regards to the field of public relations. Its findings can be useful to public relations theorists and practitioners in preparing for, handling, and recovering from a crisis. A best practice approach to using social media in a crisis, as concluded from the results, is presented at the end of the study.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On April 11, 1970 astronaut James Lovell of the Apollo 13 moon flight uttered the ominous words, “Houston, we've had a problem¹.” The problem was in reference to a ruptured oxygen tank that severely damaged the spacecraft's electrical system and put the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) into immediate crisis mode (Kauffman, 2001). NASA would be scrutinized for the way it handled the crisis, but by responding quickly, telling the truth, and providing a constant flow of information, the crisis went down in history as “a successful failure” (Kauffman, 2001).

NASA's Apollo 13 mission is just one of the significant situations that have gone down in the crisis communication case studies and are examined by public relations (PR) practitioners today (Kauffman, 2001). While NASA's crisis concerning Apollo 13 occurred more than 40 years ago, more recent examples of crisis communication situations, including the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill, Mattel's lead paint toy recall, and Domino's YouTube employee video scandal are discussed in more detail further on. While a PR practitioner might fill his or her day writing press releases, designing newsletters, and fielding media calls, the threat of a potential crisis situation is always imminent. Today, PR practitioners are educated about preparing for and responding to crisis incidents through schooling, professional development, and on-the-job experience (Taylor & Kent, 2010).

Fearn-Banks (2002) begins her work, *Crisis Communications: A Casebook Approach*, with the popular saying attributed to Murphy's Law that “If something can go wrong, it will” (p. 1). She explains that this saying “takes on real meaning for crisis planners” who must be prepared for the worst in order to emerge from it in the best possible light (2002, p. 1). While an

¹ A popular version of this quote resulted from the 1995 movie *Apollo 13*. Its script changed Lovell's famous statement, “Houston, we've had a problem” to “Houston, we have a problem”.

organization would like to think nothing negative will ever happen, the reality is that at some point in an organization's lifespan, a crisis will occur (Coombs, 2007a). From chemical plants to baby formula producers and toy manufacturers to soft drink companies, no matter what type of organization a PR practitioner may work for, crises are inevitable. How an organization responds to a crisis incident decides its survival, and that is what makes effective crisis communication such an important area of study.

Statement of Purpose

It has been argued that the era of formal organizational crisis management began in the United States after the notorious Tylenol cyanide poisoning scandal of 1982 (Jaques, 2009). However, organizational crises have existed long before then. The sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912, the Monongah mining disaster of 1907, and the great Chicago fire of 1871 were all public relations nightmares. The potential for large scale, human-induced, or naturally occurring crises is virtually built into the fabric of life (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993).

The fundamental rules for dealing with a crisis situation have changed little since research on the topic began (Coombs, 2007a; Fearn-Banks, 2002; Fink, 1986; Grunig, 1992). However, the tools with which to manage a crisis are evolving through the use and integration of social media. While many PR practitioners understand the importance of developing a crisis communication plan and participating in training for potential crisis situations, are they thinking about and actively using social media in their preparations? Social media, Web 2.0, and user-generated content have erupted in popularity and usage in general, but has the trend caught on in the management of crises?

This thesis studies the emergence of social media in crisis communication situations and organizes the findings into a best practices approach to using new technology in times of

emergency. The study aims to be another contribution in the practice of crisis communication literature, specifically regarding new technology's incorporation as a crisis communication tool. The results of this study and the researcher's compilation of a best practice approach to using social media in crisis communication add to academic and professional public relations knowledge.

Organizational Crises Then and Now

Crises put a corporation's reputation and even its existence to the test (González-Herrero & Pratt, 1996). One crisis that occurred 21 years ago and is still affecting the organization today is the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill. On March 24, 1989, the Exxon *Valdez*, a 987-foot oil tanker, ran aground on the rocks of Bligh reef in the Gulf of Alaska (Fearn-Banks, 2002). Hundreds of thousands of barrels of crude oil spilled into the waters, killing wild and marine life and destroying the environment. Pearson and Mitroff (1993) call the incident "the devastation of one of the world's most pristine and sensitive ecosystems" (p. 48).

What makes the incident so notable in the study of crisis communication management is the way Exxon handled the incident. The key to making it through a crisis is managing public perception of how the organization is handling the situation. Finger pointing, uninvolved company representatives, and a slow response to the media and the public attributed to a crisis management disaster for Exxon.

The company's immediate strategy was to admit the spill was regrettable, but to focus on the clean-up effort and restoring the area to normalcy (Fearn-Banks, 2002). However, the company never accepted responsibility for the damage. The face of the company, CEO Lawrence Rawl, was missing in action; Exxon's media center was setup in a remote area of Alaska with limited equipment, facilities, and accommodations; and no one at the corporation could verify

the extent of the damage. The media, local fishermen, environmentalists, and the public became irate with Exxon.

Exxon was not adequately prepared to respond to an accident the magnitude of the *Valdez* spill. The company had an untested communication plan and no communication team in place to implement it. Exxon did not even have the position of public relations manager until 1993 (Fearn-Banks, 2002). The incident generated so much negative publicity that Exxon Shipping was renamed the Sea River Shipping Company in hopes of disassociation from the disaster (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). The company lost billions to cleanup expenses, civil settlements, and fishermen reparations. Today, ExxonMobil² remains fiscally sound and one of the nation's biggest oil companies. However, the Alaskan oil spill is synonymous with the Exxon name; the company is still paying punitive damages; and the incident is still taught as one of the biggest environmental disasters in American history.

The Exxon *Valdez* oil spill is studied by communication scholars and PR practitioners as a “what not to do in a crisis” case study. This crisis and others lend credibility to the study of crisis communication. Noteworthy crisis situations, such as the cyanide-laced Tylenol capsules and the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill, provide lessons to learn from, as well as reveal the ramifications of ignoring crisis management.

The bottom line for organizations and PR practitioners is that a crisis (or several) will happen. An organization should learn as much as it can about crisis management and work to develop a comprehensive crisis management program (Coombs, 2007a). According to Pearson and Mitroff (1993), the purpose of crisis management is not to produce a set of plans, but to

² On November 30, 1999, Exxon merged with Mobil to form the Exxon Mobil Corporation or ExxonMobil.

prepare an organization to think creatively about the unthinkable so that the best possible decisions will be made in a time of crisis.

Today's technological advances have provided PR practitioners with convenient tools for diffusing large amounts of information quickly and to broad publics, but the advances have also increased publics' expectations for organizational excellence. Coombs (2007a) describes how the Internet is a valuable tool for gathering information about and communicating with stakeholders during a crisis, but he also points out that the Internet and the 24-hour news cycle have created pressure for organizations to respond quickly to a crisis.

A real world example of Coombs discussion occurred in April 2009, when the PR practitioners at Domino's Pizza faced a major company crisis within 48 hours due to the instant publishing of a YouTube video (Clifford, 2009). On Monday, April 13, two employees uploaded an unsavory video to YouTube. While one employee narrates the video, the other inserts pieces of cheese into his nose and wave's pieces of salami behind his backside before placing them on sandwiches to be supposedly delivered (York, 2009, April 14). By the following day, more than a million viewers had seen the disgusting video, and Domino's was scrambling to reassure consumers its products were of the highest standards (Clifford, 2009).

Domino's discovered the aforementioned video (and others by the same employees) when the company was contacted by a blogger on Monday evening (Clifford, 2009). Domino's responded to the situation within 48 hours, but by then, the offending video had received nearly one million views before it was taken down, which already represented significant damage to the brand. While the video was removed from YouTube, it was posted to other websites such as GoodAsYou.org and consumerist.com.

Tim McIntyre, Domino's spokesman, responded to media inquiries and announced the employees were terminated, but the company decided not to issue a formal press release or post a statement online. McIntyre defended the decision saying that, "the company can deal with tens of thousands of impressions, but a strong response from Domino's would alert more consumers to the embarrassment" (York, 2009, April 14, Retrieved from http://adage.com/article?article_id=135982). The company soon realized this was a mistake. Its decision not to respond aggressively through traditional and social media resources, specifically Twitter, caused consumers to question the company's integrity (Clifford, 2009).

Domino's took action again, but this time it setup a Twitter account to respond to consumer inquiries and posted its own YouTube apology video where Patrick Doyle, president of Domino's Pizza, addressed viewers (Flandez, 2009). The incident is now considered a new landmark event in crisis management (York, 2009, April 20). The case serves as an example of how to better create crisis communication, and how to create social media programs in response to crises.

This thesis analyzes whether PR practitioners are using or incorporating social media into their crisis communication plans and during a crisis situation. The study examines a planned set of questions and responses through qualitative research, specifically in-depth interviews. The term "practitioner(s)" refers to PR practitioners throughout the remainder of this study. The thesis presents a best practices approach to using social media in crisis communication situations through literature, current company crisis communication plans, and case studies.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic study begins with the review of current literature, and this thesis investigates prominent theorists and professionals' work on crisis communication and social media. Previous research and studies assist in defining crisis communication, exploring the theories of public relations and crisis response, and discovering the motivation behind using social media. The study looks at empirical research, as well as reports of practice and opinion statements in order to understand the role of crisis communication and social media in the public relations field.

Defining Crisis Communication

There is no such thing as a perfect world, and many if not all practitioners will be faced with some sort of crisis, minor or major, in their career. As Coombs (2007a) aptly puts it, "There is no truer statement in crisis management than 'No organization is immune to a crisis'" (p. ix). Regardless of the type, cause, or magnitude of a crisis, communication "must be used to bring about recovery" (Fearn-Banks, 2007, p. 6).

Understanding the dynamics of crisis situations is imperative for practitioners in order to reduce the frequency of crises and the level of harm that they cause (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003). According to Weick (1995), what is important is not the actual crisis itself, but how an organization deals with the crisis. The growth and speed of technology, the increased pressure of stakeholder perception, and the importance of impression management make the need for successful crisis communication a necessity (Coombs, 2007a; Heath, 1998). With a well-thought-out and practiced crisis communication plan, an organization can have a large impact on how successfully a crisis is managed and how the organization is perceived during and after the event.

Fearn-Banks (2007) theorizes that an organization in crisis has three possible outcomes. The first is the most severe and includes legal ramifications for both the organization and its leaders. It often results in the closure of the organization and a lasting tarnished reputation. The second outcome results in the organization's continued existence, but at a cost. The organization's credibility is severely weakened and public perception is negative, which can lead to financial loss. The last and most positive outcome is when an organization emerges from a crisis as favorable as or more favorable with its publics than it was before.

Crisis communication is the subject of much literature and research in the field of mass communication. There are multiple crisis communication strategies, models, and theories available to assist practitioners in crisis management (Ahmed, 2006; Coombs, 2007b; Fearn-Banks, 2007; González-Herrero & Pratt, 1996; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). Also, as technology has evolved so have researchers' approach to crisis management (Borremans, 2010; Jaques, 2009; Kovoov-Misra & Misra, 2007; Taylor & Perry, 2005). In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of crisis communication, it is important to look at the definition of a crisis from past and present researchers' point of view. Understanding what scholars deem a crisis can assist practitioners in developing a crisis communication plan that will enable the organization to communicate with the necessary publics using the best communication tools available.

For the purpose of this thesis, all references to crises are in regards to organizational crises and consequences of human, technological, or natural causes. Pearson and Mitroff (1993) define organizational crisis as an incident or event that poses a threat to the organization's reputation and viability. Coombs (2007a) defines a crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (p. 2-3). Crises are events,

situations, or trends that can threaten the survival or goals of an organization (Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984). Taylor and Perry describe a crisis using González-Herrero and Pratt's (1996) three parameters. "A crisis has to be a significant disruption to a business, social environment or an organization; it has to result in national news media coverage; and it needs to be a situation where the public needs information to make better decisions," said Taylor and Perry (2005, p. 211).

Ahmed (2006) breaks a crisis into two metaphorical types: the cobra and the python. The cobra is the sudden crisis where disaster hits taking a company completely by surprise and plunging it straight into crisis. For example, when NASA's space shuttle, Challenger, suddenly broke apart seconds after takeoff, the agency was forced into an immediate crisis situation (Kaufman, 1988). The python is the crisis creep that can steal up and gradually crush an organization by building issue onto issue. The case of McDonald's hot coffee spill became a "creeping crisis." The company received several hundred complaints of coffee burns over the years, failed to resolve the issue, and as a result, one woman's law suit over third-degree burns almost cost the company \$2.9 million (the case was eventually settled for an undisclosed amount), and did cost the company the trust and good opinion of its patrons (González-Herrero & Pratt, 1996). Mitroff (2004) said, "crises result from a serious breakdown or malfunction in the relationship among people, organizations, and technologies" (p. 3).

While there are many definitions of a crisis according to different scholars, many highlight the same common elements in their explanations. Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2003) sum up a crisis as "a fundamental threat to system stability, a questioning of core assumptions and beliefs, and threats to high-priority goals, including image, legitimacy, profitability, and even survival" (p. 4). Fearn-Banks' (2007) definition of a crisis mentions many of the same key

words as Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer's (2003) definition. Fearn-Banks' (2007) said a crisis is "a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name" causing interruptions in business and threats to the organization's very existence (p. 6).

With a good understanding of what a crisis exactly is and what outcomes can result, practitioners can begin to approach crisis response and the development of a well thought-out crisis communication plan. Researchers have developed several strategies and theories regarding crisis response. Fink (1986) said that crises evolve in phases, and a crisis is the final stage of a continuous cumulative process of human and organizational failure.

Pauchant and Mitroff (1992) created a five-stage model that links the developmental feature of a crisis to three broader crisis management strategies: proactive, reactive, and interactive. Their five stages are signal detection, preparation/prevention, containment/damage limitation, recovery, and learning. Proactive crisis management involves stage one, signal detection, and two, preparation/prevention. In these stages an organization can detect crisis signals and change behaviors or activities to avoid further crisis involvement. Reactive management involves stage three, containment and damage limitation, and stage four, recovery. These stages are reactive in that they occur after a crisis. It is now too late to prevent a crisis, but it is imperative to contain it and work towards returning to normalcy. Finally, interactive strategies involve learning from one's mistakes and using the knowledge gained from a crisis in preparing for future crisis management situations.

Coombs (2007a) uses a set of four interrelated factors to compose a crisis management plan: prevention, preparation, response, and revision. Coombs (2007b) is also the author of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). This theory provides "an evidence-based

framework for understanding how to maximize the reputational protection afforded by post-crisis communication” (p. 163). Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2007a) also describe crisis communication as a four-step process: managing uncertainty, responding to a crisis, resolving a crisis, and learning from a crisis. All of these processes and stages are worthy of examination, however for the purpose of this thesis, the theoretical perspectives of two-way symmetrical communication, issues-management approach to crises, and image restoration will be more closely examined.

For the purposes of this thesis, a crisis is defined as any unplanned situation or significant event that evokes a sense of urgency and threat and that carries a high level of risk and great potential for negative outcomes. Crisis management is defined as the strategic process by which an organization deals with a major unpredictable event, specifically through the use of preparation and training in order to gain organizational control. Crisis communication is the dialog that occurs between the afflicted organization and its publics during and after the crisis occurs.

Public Relations Theories and Crisis Response

Crisis communication is typically associated with public relations (Seeger, 2006). This portion of the literature review explores the theories of public relations and crisis response in order to understand the role of crisis communication in the public relations field. According to Fearn-Banks (2007) academic researchers study the methods and procedures of professional communicators and develop theories on what is and is not effective. While many professional communicators do not study these theories or even know them off-hand, they use them in their daily work. Fearn-Banks (2007) describes a theory as a prediction based on what has happened. “It is used to explain what will work, what decisions should be made and how, what actions are

likely to result and how, and how things relate,” writes Fearn-Banks (p. 39). Severin and Tankard (2001) say the goal of theory is to formulate statements or propositions that will have some explanatory power.

When it comes to public relations and crisis communication the fields are still considered new and theories are evolving (Coombs, 2007b; Fearn-Banks, 2007; Grunig, 1992; Hutton, Goodman, Alexander, & Genest, 2001; Jaques, 2009). However, there are many theories on communication, which lend themselves to the study and understanding of both public relations and crisis communication. Grunig and Hunt (1984) define public relations by the term “models” and use four models to describe the four types of public relations they believe evolved through history. The four models are press agency/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical.

Each model differs in purpose as to the types of public relations performed by organizations and individuals. J. E. Guiniven gives a brief but detailed description of each model. Guiniven (2002) said:

Grunig identified four models of public relations: press agency, where publicity is an end in and of itself; public information, where there is an outflow of accurate, albeit favorable information about an organization; two-way asymmetrical, where research is used to determine the points that can be exploited to persuade a targeted public; and two-way symmetrical, where research is used for uncovering points of agreement and where the goal is open dialogue and honest exchanges in an effort to resolve conflict and reach a compromise. (p. 395-396)

“Although public relations developed as a persuasive communication function, not all of these models use public relations for that purpose,” said Grunig and Hunt (1984, p. 21). This quote reveals how the practice of public relations has evolved into a field that strives for mutual understanding. The modern practice of public relations is known as the two-way symmetrical model for communication.

Under this model, the goal is to achieve conversation between an organization and its publics. The exchange of information, ideas, and opinions occurs between both parties with the expectation of change or compromise from either side. It is a process of collaboration or cooperation. This model represents the most ethical and excellent basis for public relations. Harold Burson, as cited in Grunig and Hunt (1984), said it is the role of the public relations practitioner to make sure “that business institutions perform as servants of the people” (p. 43).

In 1992, Grunig expanded upon the theory of public relations in the work *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*. The theory of public relations evolves to support “the nature of effective organizational communication, excellent public relations departments, and the contribution that effective communication makes to successful organizations” (Grunig, 1992, p. 2). It is a vital part of organizational planning and management. Public relations increase the effectiveness of organizations by building relationships with publics that can constrain or enhance the mission of the organization (J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1991). This is especially true in a crisis situation.

The study of crisis communication strategies, theories, and principles, as well as the simulation and practice of crisis events are necessary aspects of a practitioner’s profession (Zaremba, 2010). Two theories that play important roles not only in crisis situations, but also in the field of public relations overall are the theories of issues management and image restoration.

Theory of Issues Management

Issues management is the process of scanning, tracking, and monitoring in order to assist organizations in understanding and strategically adapting to its “public policy environment” (Heath, 1998, p. 274). The practice evolved in the mid-1970s as an attempt to define the strategies that companies needed to use to counter critics of business policies and practices,

especially in regards to pressure put on legislators for stricter controls of business activity (Regester & Larkin, 2005). Heath and Cousino (1990) define issues management as “a comprehensive activity, which consists of specific functions, some of which require the expertise of public relations practitioners, and the performance of which can strengthen the rationale for including public relations in the dominant coalition of corporations” (p. 9).

A key aspect of issues management is its focus on two-way symmetrical communication. Heath (1998) explains, “issues management entails efforts to achieve understanding and increase satisfaction between parties and to negotiate their exchange of stakes” (p. 9). Two-way symmetrical communication is implemented in order to promote mutual understanding and minimize conflict. Smith (2005) supports this and emphasizes the proactive aspect of the theory; “Issues management helps the organization interact with its publics. It helps an organization settle the issue early or divert it, or perhaps even prevent its emergence” (p. 21-22). Cutlip, Center, and Broom, (2000) also refer to issues management as a proactive process.

The proactive nature of issues management makes it a preventative technique for crises. It allows for a practitioner to identify and respond to potential organizational issues before they occur. Within a crisis management plan, the issues-management process “should be concerned with any issue that may have an impact on the organization’s well-being” (González-Herrero & Pratt, 1996, p. 85). How an issue is handled early on can be the difference between a looming crisis and a proactive solution.

While issues management focuses on proactive solutions, there are times when a crisis cannot be averted and issues management becomes a reactive measure. According to Jaques (2009), issues management has both a distinct proactive and reactive mode, and he warns against the perception of issue management largely as crisis avoidance, which can lead to the notion that

a crisis is a failure of issues management. Heath (1998) reinforces this concept by saying that “Crisis management and issue management are linked” (p. 289). Sometimes a crisis has the potential to become an issue if it creates or adds to stakeholder’s perceptions that a problem is in need of addressing and some issues may become a crisis if stakeholder’s higher standards of performance are not met (Heath, 1998).

Crisis management consists of the fundamental functions of issues management: strategic business planning, issues monitoring, ascertaining and implementing high standards of corporate responsibility, and having key personnel trained and coordinated to communicate honestly and factually (Heath, 1998). These functions are not only a way for organizations to prevent a crisis, but they also prepare an organization for battle during one. “The goal of issues management before, during, and after a crisis is to restore and strengthen the relationship between the entity suffering a crisis and its stakeholders and stakeholders,” said Heath (1998).

At the same time, an organization must deal not only with the crisis situation, but its reputation as well. Wartick (1992) characterizes reputation as “the aggregate of a single stakeholder’s perceptions of how well organizational responses are meeting the demands and expectations of many organizational stakeholders” (p. 34). Organizational reputation develops through the information stakeholders receive about the organization (Coombs, 2007b). A company’s reputation is linked to its success, and both reputation and success are tested during a crisis.

Theory of Image Restoration

In a crisis situation, perhaps the most crucial stage of crisis response is in the strategic post-crisis stage. During this time, uncertainty abounds for many publics, stakeholders, and the company itself (Dardis & Haigh, 2008). Research has attempted to determine and describe the

specific post-crisis communication strategies that might be most appropriate in meeting the company's goals in such situations. According to Ulmer, Seeger, and Sellnow (2007b), "the dominant paradigm for crisis communication has been image restoration and its various iterations" (p. 130).

Image restoration often comes into play in the aftermath of a crisis. Its focus is to handle post-crisis communication, specifically regarding accusations and responses (Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007b). Image restoration is an important function during and especially in the aftermath of a crisis because it assists in restoring an organization's invaluable reputation.

Benoit (1995) outlines the theory of image restoration as the use of communication strategies to reduce, redress, or avoid damage to one's reputation from perceived transgressions. The theory has been closely linked to Rosenfield's theory of mass media apology, Burke's theory of guilt, and Ware and Linkugel's theory of apologia (Benoit, 1995). Image restoration theory focuses on message options. The key to understanding image repair strategies is to consider the nature of attacks or complaints that prompt such responses or instigate a corporate crisis (Benoit, 1997). "An attack has two components: the accused is held responsible for an action and that act is considered offensive," according to Benoit (1997, p. 178).

Benoit identified five image restoration strategies including: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the act, corrective action, and mortification. Under each of these strategies are subcategories. Often in the case of denial a company will either simply deny its involvement or responsibility; or shift the blame. For example, in the previously mentioned Exxon *Valdez* oil spill crisis, CEO Lawrence Rawl blamed Alaskan officials and the Coast Guard for the delay in cleanup efforts because "the company could not obtain immediate

authorization on the scene to begin cleaning up the oil or applying a chemical dispersant” (Mathews & Peterson, 1989, p. A1).

Some companies will use the evasion of responsibility strategy and claim provocation in response to another company or that the offensive action under scrutiny was completely accidental. A company may even admit that wrongdoing occurred but with good intentions in mind (Benoit, 1995). Benoit mentions the 1992 Sears, Roebuck and Co. auto repair fraud when Chairman Ed Brennan characterized the auto repair mistakes in question as inadvertent, rather than intentional (Benoit, 1997).

The third strategy is reducing the offensiveness of the event. This can involve tactics such as minimization, differentiation, and transcendence. A company may try to bolster its own image, by focusing on the positive characteristics associated with the organization. Attacking the accuser and compensation are also tactics used in reducing offensiveness of the event. Talk show host Oprah Winfrey turned to minimization and bolstering in trying to reduce the offensiveness of her remarks about mad cow disease, which led to a libel lawsuit filed by the Texas Beef Group (Oles, 2010). Bolstering was evident when Winfrey “emphasized that her well-intended motivation was only to inform and educate her audience” (Oles, 2010, p.46). She used minimization by defending her First Amendment right to free speech.

The fourth and fifth strategies are corrective action and mortification. These strategies involve taking steps to right wrongs and publicly admitting remorse for any harm caused. Benoit (1997) stresses the fact that if a company is truly at fault it should admit this immediately. Not only is it the morally correct thing to do, but also “attempting to deny true accusations can backfire” (p. 184). In 1990, AT&T experienced a service crisis when an error in a computer program caused only about half of all long distance calls to be completed in a 9-hour period.

According to AT&T's Senior Vice President for Public Relations Marilyn Laurie, AT&T would manage the crisis by acknowledging the problem, assuming responsibility, volunteering information and correcting false reports (Millar & Heath, 2004). AT&T immediately took steps to correct the problem and apologized for any inconvenience the computer error had caused.

Regardless of who is truly at fault, whether it is an employee, act of nature, or accident, a company must take responsibility and answer to its publics. Maintaining a positive image is a central goal of communication. Benoit (1995) said, "Our face, our image, or reputation is a valuable commodity" (p. vii). Fearn-Banks (2007) points out that image restoration is not only about determining what is hurting an organization's reputation, but also what publics need to be addressed in order to restore a positive image. Arguably, many of the best communication tools used to interact with one's publics are found under the umbrella of social media.

Social Media in the 21st Century

This section of the literature focuses on the continuously evolving technology and communication function of social media. The term social media is used in this paper to refer to user/consumer-generated content (Owyang & Toll, 2007). Taylor and Kent (2010) define social media as online communication tools. "Social media tools include interactive social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn, as well as blogs, podcast, message boards, online videos and picture albums, and mobile telephone alerts," said Taylor and Kent (2010, p. 209). Social media is composed of the various electronic tools, technologies, and applications that facilitate interactive communication and content exchange, enabling the user to move back and forth easily between the roles of audience and content producers (Tinker & Fouse, 2009). The Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) are examples of computer-mediated communication (CMC). According to December (1996):

CMC involves information exchange that takes place on the global, cooperative collection of networks using the TCP/IP protocol suite and the client-server model for data communication. Messages may undergo a range of time and distribution manipulations and encode a variety of media types. The resulting information content exchanged can involve a wide range of symbols people use for communication. (p. 24)

The innovation of online communication is fast becoming an important strategy in any organization's crisis communication plan (Taylor & Perry, 2005). The question today is not so much a question of "if" but "how" to use social media in public relations (Taylor & Kent, 2010). The Internet can support strategic communication efforts, inform, seek opinions and positions from relevant publics, and serve as a crisis communication tool (Taylor & Perry, 2005).

According to Borremans (2010):

In the past 10 years, the Web has evolved from a one-way communication platform to an interactive, fast-paced, two-way social communication system available to anyone with an Internet connection and a connected device. This change affects all aspects of crisis communication, from speed to reach to impact. (p. 31)

Regarding crisis communication, the Internet can be used for dual purposes. Perry, Taylor, and Doerfel (2003) discuss the usefulness of the Internet in conducting environmental scanning to prepare for a crisis. Organizations have the ability to search through vast amounts of information and create effective issues management strategies to detect problems before they become crises. The Internet also serves as a resource through which organizations can communicate immediately to publics in a crisis situation, thereby influencing its environments and even generating feedback (Perry, Taylor, & Doerfel, 2003).

When it comes to social media, people can be empowered. Anyone with access to a computer and the Internet can create content freely and distribute it. The advent of the Internet and social media has made two-way symmetrical communication more accessible to practitioners and their publics. In 2005, Taylor and Perry conducted a study to collect data about Internet usage during a crisis. The study sampled 92 organizations in crisis and monitored each

one's crisis response. The study went one step further and viewed what tactics the organizations that used the Internet in response to a crisis employed.

Two categories described Internet crisis tactics. The first category of Internet crisis tactics identified "traditional tactics" and included all traditional and standard forms of one-way crisis communication, such as transcripts of news conferences, press releases, fact sheets, question and answer sheets, and memos or letters that had been adopted for the Web (p. 212). The second category identified "innovative media tactics" that incorporated the unique features associated with Internet communication. Five innovative interactive communication tactics were identified: dialogic communication, connecting links, real-time monitoring, multi-media effects, and online chat.

Results revealed that more than 54 percent of the 92 organizations adopted the Internet into their crisis response, and 33 of the organizations (66 percent) integrated at least one of the innovative media tactics into their crisis response. The most popular innovative media tactics were connecting links (46 percent) and opportunities for two-way communication (44 percent). However, news releases were still the most favored tactic for communicating to the public during a crisis. Taylor and Perry's study revealed "organizations would enact a mixed motive approach by combining both traditional and new media communication tactics during crisis response" (2005, p. 212).

Case Studies: A Notable Positive and Negative Crisis Response

Social media offers practitioners both opportunities and obstacles in regards to crisis communication. Social media and its components impact in some degree both positively and negatively almost every organization that provides some sort of service or product (Owyang & Toll, 2007). Below are two notable crisis situations that show the positive and negative effects

social media can have on a crisis. In the case of Mattel's lead paint scare, social media was used to increase the immediacy of providing and responding to public concern. On the opposite spectrum, the case of Intel's Pentium chip shows how social media can aggravate an issue into a crisis when organizational response to stakeholders is slow.

Mattel took full advantage of traditional and social media communication methods in 2007 when the company was plagued with four consecutive product recalls within a three-month time period. Choi and Lin (2009) categorize the 2007 Mattel product recall case as a human-error product recall that is associated with high crisis responsibility.

On August 1, 2007, Mattel announced that it was recalling one million Fisher Price toys upon the discovery that they contained excessive levels of lead paint (Mcilroy, 2007). A contract manufacturer in China made many of the contaminated toys. The recalls led not only to a sharp reduction in Mattel's sales but also to public hearings in the U.S. Congress, which significantly affected Mattel's reputation. Eventually, the company was fined \$2.3 million in civil penalties for violating a federal lead paint ban that resulted in the recall of millions of toys (Kavilanz, 2009).

Mattel was facing a public relations disaster and the possible closure of the company. It reacted immediately by not only recalling the toys, but also making sure it communicated to its publics. In a statement, CEO Robert Eckert said:

We apologize to everyone affected by this recall, especially those who bought the toys in question. Our goal is to correct this problem, improve our systems and maintain the trust of the families that have allowed us to be part of their lives by acting responsibly and quickly to address their concerns.

(Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/consumer/story/2007/08/02/mattel.html>)

The company issued an apology in which it admitted its fault and accepted responsibility.

The company made full use of its website and immediately posted details of its revised safety plan on the site. It also designated an entire section of its consumer relations support

center to the recall incident (Retrieved from <http://service.mattel.com/us/recall.asp>). There, concerned consumers could find an easy-to-use chart with the name, number, and image of the product recalled. Links directed users to sections to assist in determining if owned products were affected by the recall, to view the official recall announcement, and to an application for assistance in returning the recalled item.

Mattel knew that it had to regain the trust of its consumers, a majority who were concerned parents. The company launched a national advertising campaign to assure parents that the situation was not being taken lightly. Full-page ads in various newspapers included a letter from Mattel CEO Bob Eckert stating, “Our long record of safety at Mattel is why we’re one of the most trusted names with parents. And I am confident that the actions we are taking now will maintain that trust” (Bansal, 2007, Retrieved from <http://uk.reuters.com/article/idUKN1429386120070814>).

Mattel emerged from the toy recall crisis with some damage, such as the congressional fine, but the company also managed to maintain control of the situation. As blog postings and other consumer generated content emerged about the recall, much of it reflected the information Mattel had immediately distributed, and often postings directed readers to Mattel’s website for more information (Retrieved from <http://www.education.com/magazine/article/Mattel/>). The company also tracked all communication in the media related to the recall, including blogs, consumer affairs call notes and radio, newspaper, and broadcast clips. Mattel’s situation shows how traditional communication methods (press releases and fact sheets) can be combined with new methods (websites, tweets) to maximize crisis communication and garner control of it as well.

While the immediacy and ease of the Internet and social media produce many positive developments, especially regarding crisis communication, those same attributes also allow for unforeseen negative situations. Such was the case with Intel and its error-prone Pentium processor. Internet newsgroups played a key role in publicizing the problems with the Pentium chip, and Hearit (1999) claimed that the incident “is the first in which cyberspace played a critical role in transforming consumer dissatisfaction” (p. 293).

In December 1994, Intel Corporation was plunged into crisis mode when Internet newsgroups were filled with chatter and accusations that the Pentium processor was prone to error when doing sophisticated calculations (Hearit, 1999). The company shipped an estimated two million units of Pentium chips with a defective floating-point unit that tabulated the wrong answer when performing some double-precision division equations (Crothers, 1994).

According to Hearit (1999), Intel was aware of the flaw:

...but given the high demand for the chip and the relative unlikeliness that it would cause a significant computational error, the company chose to let the flawed chips make their way through the production process rather than suspending production until the new, redesigned chips were ready. (p. 295)

On October 30, Thomas Nicely, a mathematics professor, discovered an error doing research and e-mailed several of his colleagues about the issue. His colleagues conducted research test of their own, discovered errors, and concluded the Pentium chip was to blame. The trade publication *Electrical Engineering Times* published a lead article about Professor Nicely’s findings, which brought the issue to the attention of Internet newsgroups (Hearit, 1999). The discussion began on the newsgroup comp.sys.intel and spread to other newsgroups and Internet mailing lists. Once the information was on the Internet, the Pentium chip flaw was hotly debated, and consumers soon accused Intel of ignoring the problem and possibly hiding other issues as well.

Intel reacted to the crisis with minimal response. It claimed that the average spreadsheet user could encounter “this subtle flaw of reduced precision once in every 27,000 years of use” (Crothers, 1994, p. 1), and the company would only replace computers for users who could prove their work was sophisticated enough to require the calculations. However, these actions were not satisfactory to many consumers, and the crisis only grew when IBM suspended all sales of its computers that used the flawed Pentium chip. IBM decided to halt shipments when researchers discovered “the flaw could arise as frequently as once every 24 days for an average user” (Lewis, 1994, Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/12/13/us/ibm-deals-blow-to-a-rival-as-it-suspends-pentium-sales.html?pagewanted=1>). Intel eventually announced that it would replace all flawed Pentium chips with an updated version and even published an advertisement in the *Wall Street Journal* broadcasting the news (Hearit, 1999).

Intel’s crisis situation was distinctive in the sense that the Internet played a key role in publicizing the company’s flawed product. The Internet served as a common communication tool that allowed users to speak their minds about their dissatisfaction with the product. As the negative Pentium chip comments grew, the company eventually had to face the issue. In the article "On-Line Snits Fomenting Public Storms," *Wall Street Journal* reporters Bart Ziegler and Jared Sandberg commented, “Some industry insiders say that had the Pentium flub occurred five years ago, before the Internet got hot and the media caught on, Intel might have escaped a public flogging and avoided a costly recall” (p. B1). Intel consumers communicated about the problem online and as a result, were able to have an impact not otherwise possible.

Intel’s Pentium chip crisis is just one of many situations where the Internet and social media are forcing companies to acknowledge its importance. Social media tools can have tremendous positive and negative impacts for an organization. The reality in today’s world is that

the Internet and social media cannot be ignored, especially in a crisis situation. Controlling the flow of information in a crisis situation is often vital to its successful management. Wigley and Fontenot (2010) discuss how today, practitioners must face “two major issues: (1) the media’s use of non-official sources and (2) the media’s use of technology to gather information from these non-official sources” (p. 187).

Summary and Research Questions

This literature review illustrates the importance of crisis communication as a facet in the field of public relations. History and common knowledge confirm that a crisis can and will happen. Research illustrates that immediately enacted crisis management and communication are imperative to an organization’s survival in a crisis. Public relations scholars and practitioners emphasize the importance of preparation and practice, immediate response, continual follow-up communication, and evaluation in order to emerge from a crisis no worse for the wear.

Today, practitioners have the ability to use social media as additional crisis communication tools. Social media has made the transmission of critically important information immediate and far-reaching. It not only allows for an organization to communicate with its stakeholders in times of emergency, but for the stakeholders to communicate with the organization as well. Some argue that social media is now a necessity for crisis communication. Social media not only has redefined timeliness, but increased the speed of awareness as well.

This thesis studies social media within the framework of crisis communication. It aims to determine the role of social media in the crisis communication strategies of practitioners and to discover how social media fits into the traditional models of public relations. The thesis seeks to answer the following research questions:

Research Question One: Are practitioners incorporating social media into their crisis communication plan(s)?

Research Question Two: Are practitioners using social media during a crisis communication situation?

Research Question Three: How do practitioners use social media in a crisis communication situation?

Research Question Four: Do demographic differences in practitioners play a role in the use of social media in a crisis communication situation?

Research Question Five: Do organizational types play a role in the use of social media in a crisis communication situation?

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

In this study, the researcher conducted structured in-depth interviews with sixteen PR practitioners to explore responses to the proposed research questions. The researcher decided that in-depth interviews were the best data collection method to determine if and how social media was being integrated into crisis communication plans and its use during a crisis situation.

Qualitative Research: Interviews

Qualitative research was chosen as the methodology because of its ability to discover participants' meanings and ways of understanding (Lunt, 1996). According to Miller and Dingwall (1997), "qualitative researchers systematically-but artfully-invoke and use methodological techniques and strategies in formulating and solving research problems" (p. 3). The objective of the research is to describe and analyze the processes through which social realities are constructed, and the social relationships through which people connect to one another (Miller & Dingwall, 1997). A common complaint with qualitative research is that the findings cannot be generalized to the rest of the field; however, in this case valuable lessons regarding the handling of a crisis are certainly educational tools (Greenhalgh & Taylor, 1997).

While there are several different types of qualitative research, a qualitative interview study was the designated method. According Wimmer and Dominick (2003), "The most important advantage of the in-depth interview is the wealth of detail that it provides" (p. 127). Interviews are powerful ways to understand fellow human beings (Benney & Hughes, 1956). According to Weiss (1994), the qualitative interview is one that sacrifices uniformity in order to gain a fuller, richer understanding of a respondent's experience. Through the interview process, participant's individual opinions and accounts were gathered. Unlike quantitative data, which requires that variables under consideration be measured, the researcher used qualitative

interviews to allow for flexibility and the discovery of new facets that were not considered before the study began. Kvale (1996) lists seven stages in the interview process: thematizing, designing the study so it addresses the research questions, the interview itself, transcribing, analyzing, verification, and reporting. The researcher used Kvale's seven stages to guide her in preparing, conducting, and analyzing the interviews.

Participant Selection

Social media is still a relatively new tool in the public relations field. While some practitioners are using components such as Twitter and Facebook in their daily work, others remain unfamiliar or even wary of the techniques. In selecting the participants for this study, it was important to have a reasonable number of diverse practitioners in order to try to cover the social media knowledge gap and integrate multiple perspectives into the study. Participants varied in age, gender, and race to assist in collecting unbiased responses for research question four, and participant's organization type also varied in regards to research question five.

For the purposes of this study, a sample size of sixteen participants was deemed sufficient in order to effectively and without bias answer the proposed research questions. The researcher, through personal and professional knowledge, contacted each participant. As a current practitioner, she used her professional development organizations and workforce experience to find suitable subjects. The researcher also relied on snowball sampling to select more participants.

Snowball sampling is a technique for developing a research sample that uses referrals from initial subjects to generate additional subjects (Goodman, 1961). Once one member of a sample is located, he or she is then asked to name other potential individuals that would be appropriate sample members, who are then interviewed and asked to supply additional names,

and so forth. Snowball sampling has been criticized in research for its strong possibilities for under sampling (Welch, 1975). This potential bias leads to probable biases in the educational, social class, and income level of the respondents since people with higher education and income are more likely to have wider circles of friends and greater participation in various organized groups (Almond & Verba, 1963; Verba & Nie, 1972).

In the case of this study, however, snowball sampling allowed the researcher to broaden the participant group because she did not solely rely on practitioners she previously knew. While the sample size initially consisted of the researcher's personal contacts, the researcher did recruit new interviewees suggested to her by other participants. The study also specifically targeted PR practitioners, which already involves using a segmented sample. The amount of bias is minimal since the sample is already limited to the public relations community, and the study is specifically looking for in-depth knowledge required by those key informants.

The researcher conducted individual in-depth interviews with each practitioner that took anywhere from 29 to 52 minutes. Participants were asked open-ended questions that were geared towards the practitioners' crisis management practices, specifically regarding social media. Table one provides a detailed breakdown of how participants varied in age, gender and race, as well as their vocational types, such as not for profit, corporation, or government entity.

Table One: List of Interviewed Participants

Participant	Gender	Race	Age	Organization Type
Bob	Male	Caucasian	58	Non-profit
Casey	Female	Caucasian	28	Government
Christina	Female	Caucasian	31	Government
Jane	Female	Caucasian	38	Government
Jennifer	Female	Caucasian	33	Oil and Gas Corporation
Jesse	Male	Caucasian	28	Business Incubator

Table One: continued

Jessica	Female	Caucasian	34	Non-profit
Julie	Female	Caucasian	37	Food Distribution Company
Karla	Female	Caucasian	55	Private Company
Kelly	Female	Caucasian	29	Non-profit
Kristine	Female	Caucasian	38	University
Michael	Male	Caucasian	47	Non-profit
Nicole	Female	Caucasian	40	Non-profit
Trace	Male	Caucasian	38	University
Stacey	Female	Caucasian	38	Chemical Corporation
Whitney	Female	African American	22	Bank

Institutional Review Board Approval

In any study or experiment where human subjects are involved it is imperative to gain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. This ensures that two broad standards are upheld: subjects are not placed at undue risk, and they give responses that are not coerced, as well as informed consent to their participation. In this study, all participants signed an IRB-approved consent form upon receiving a brief description of the study and its purpose. If any participant was unwilling to sign the IRB-approved consent form, he or she was dismissed from the study. The researcher did remove three potential study participants upon their decline to participate.

In order to comply with university research regulations, the researcher completed the NIH online human subjects training. The researcher successfully completed the course and received an electronic certificate as verification. The certificate was then sent to the IRB office for record purposes. The researcher is committed to acting with a scientific purpose, behaving ethically, and abiding by all regulations.

The Interview Process

Fourteen interviews were conducted in person. The remaining two interviews were conducted by phone. Each interview, either in person or via phone, was recorded with the participant's permission by a digital audio recorder. The recording was then transcribed to print for use as thesis data. Interviews lasted no more than sixty minutes and all participants were asked the same set of questions. Interviewing of practitioners continued until saturation occurred and answers to questions became redundant.

Interview questions primarily focused on crisis management, crisis communication, and social media. Questions were based on crisis management models, public relations theories including issues management and image restoration, and the current definition of social media. The list of interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

Data Analysis

Analyzing data from qualitative research is no less rigorous than from quantitative data and requires attention and sensitivity to both process and substance (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Data for this study was derived from sixteen in-depth interviews conducted with PR practitioners. The data analysis for this study followed a modified version of the constant comparative technique. Five research questions were posed prior to the study. The researcher searched for trends and key words in respondents' answers and grouped them into appropriate and meaningful categories. Explanations to the proposed research questions emerged from the data itself.

After each interview was completed, the researcher listened to the interview's recording and transcribed the conversation. This was an essential step in data analysis because as time passes, it becomes increasingly difficult to reconstruct information. This is especially true with

respect to the insights that the researcher may have had when listening to the respondent, or with respect to important relationships or connections that the respondent may have expressed.

The researcher was able to closely look at the data and organize pertinent information in chronological order according to the sequence of events that occurred during the interview. The researcher preformed a preliminary run-through of the data by thoroughly rereading each interview and jotting down trending areas or category assignments. Specifically, the researcher assigned a color to each of the five research questions. Green for research question one, red for research question two, blue for research question three, purple for research question four, and orange for research question five. The researcher then highlighted data in the transcripts with the matching color in relation to the research question. Upon completion of reviewing the sixteenth interview, a category system emerged from the data.

Once all the data was collected, the researcher began analyzing it through a modified constant comparative technique. Glaser and Strauss first articulated the constant comparative technique in 1967, and Lincoln and Guba refined it in 1985. The technique is suggested as a procedure for interpreting empirical material. At a basic level, it consists of four stages: comparing incidents applicable to each category, integrating categories and their properties, searching for relationships and themes among categories, and writing the theory.

Step one involves the researcher putting “each unit of analysis into a set of provisional categories. As each new unit is examined, it is compared to other units previously assigned to that category to see whether its inclusion is appropriate” (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003, p. 112). In this study each participant’s answer to a question became a unit of analysis. After several interviews, answers to the same questions became repetitive and were placed into categories.

After repeating this process with every interview, or unit of analysis, the researcher was able to fine-tune and refine categories.

In the second step, the researcher looked at the categories and assigned underlying meaning to each one. This step allowed the researcher to discover what was emerging as information from the topic and what could be determined as research outcomes. For example, the researcher looked at the “immediacy” category and proposed “social media components are beneficial in a crisis because they allow for real-time two-way communication.

Throughout the entire constant comparative process, the researcher is constantly comparing category-to-category and statement-to-statement. Step three involves searching for relationships and common patterns across categories. In this study, the researcher noted that several participants discussed time constraints. Some practitioners did not use social media because they had too many other tasks. Some did not use social media because their staff was too small or because it was a full-time job position. The researcher generalized that the large amount of time needed to properly use social media is an essential reason in why it is not being used.

The final stage of the process reports the researcher’s interpretation of the information and relates it to the main objectives of the study, which in this case is the incorporation of social media in crisis communication. The following section presents the researcher’s findings based on textual interviews and conversation analysis.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

As stated in the introduction, the purpose of this study is to determine the existence and use or nonexistence of social media in crisis communication settings. It is important to note that all sixteen participants were familiar with and used traditional and new media in crisis management.

For the purpose of this thesis, new media and social media are defined differently with social media being a subset of new media. Earlier in the literature review, Tinker and Fouse (2009) defined social media as composed of the various electronic tools, technologies, and applications that facilitate interactive communication and content exchange, enabling the user to move back and forth easily between the roles of audience and content producers. The difference between new media and social media centers on the idea that the user plays both the role of the sender and the receiver interchangeably. With new media tools such as mobile text messaging³, website postings, and e-mails, the user serves just as the producer of information. The key word to remember in this study's definition of social media is interactive.

Data gathered from 16 in-depth interviews was analyzed to find answers to the five proposed research questions. This data is organized by the five research questions and related findings.

Research Question One: Are Practitioners Incorporating Social Media Into Their Crisis Communication Plan(s)?

According to the data, the majority of PR practitioners did in some way incorporate social media components into their organization's crisis communication plan. However, the answer to this question cannot be definitively answered "yes" or "no." The advantage of

³ On page 16 of the literature review, one definition of social media provided by Taylor and Kent (2010) includes mobile telephone alerts in the list of social media components. For the purpose of this thesis, mobile telephone alerts or text messages are considered new media.

qualitative research in this study is that participants' responses focus on meaning and understanding. Answers explain, describe, and explore participants' decisions and rationale. Responses varied from having no communication plan, to not using social media at all, to a projected use of it, and finally, full incorporation of social media components in a crisis situation. Table Two reveals how each participant answered research question one.

Table Two: Participant Response to Incorporation of Social Media in Crisis Plan(s)

Participant	Gender	Race	Age	Organization Type	Inclusion of Social Media in Crisis Communication Plan(s)
Bob	Male	Caucasian	58	Non-profit	No (While not written into a plan, its use in a crisis was indicated.)
Casey	Female	Caucasian	28	Government	Yes
Christina	Female	Caucasian	31	Government	No (While not written into a plan, its use in a crisis was indicated.)
Jane	Female	Caucasian	38	Government	Yes
Jennifer	Female	Caucasian	33	Oil and Gas Corporation	No
Jesse	Male	Caucasian	28	Business Incubator	Organization did not have a crisis communication plan.
Jessica	Female	Caucasian	34	Non-profit	No (Projected incorporation indicated.)
Julie	Female	Caucasian	37	Food Distribution Company	No (Included in hurricane crisis plan and currently being incorporated)
Karla	Female	Caucasian	55	Private Company	No
Kelly	Female	Caucasian	29	Non-profit	Organization did not have a crisis communication plan.
Kristine	Female	Caucasian	38	University	Yes
Michael	Male	Caucasian	47	Non-profit	No
Nicole	Female	Caucasian	40	Non-profit	Yes
Trace	Male	Caucasian	38	University	Yes
Stacey	Female	Caucasian	38	Chemical Corporation	No (Projected incorporation indicated.)
Whitney	Female	African American	22	Bank	Yes

Of the 16 practitioners interviewed for this study, six practitioners had up-to-date crisis communication plans that discussed instructions for social media use in organization crises. Five practitioners responded that while their crisis communication plans currently did not include social media, they did not exclude its use in future versions of their plans or through immediate incorporation in a crisis situation. Three practitioners indicated their plans included no use of social media, and two practitioners were currently crafting crisis communication plans that would include the use of social media.

Practitioner Kelly had a procedural plan for natural disaster or fire issues, but nothing in relation to a crisis communication plan. “In terms of communication after a crisis there is none. I am working on it,” said Kelly. When asked if the future plan would include the use of social media, Kelly responded, “I guess it all depends on the situation. Our organization is really not in the position to use social media as a response to a crisis. It’s more of just updating people on what happened.”

Kelly’s organization is a big user of social media in day-to-day operations. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Foursquare are all used to communicate with the public. While Kelly was unsure of how or if social media would be incorporated into her crisis communication plan, she did note that if her publics reached out to the organization through those media, they would not be ignored. “If people ask us questions using social media or Twitter or voice concerns about something that happened here, we would 100 percent answer those questions and be open and transparent about what happened,” said Kelly.

It was clear from the responses of two practitioners that social media was not included in their plans.

Karla: No it does not. And when you asked to interview me I thought about it, and I thought, “Oh my gosh, should we be using social media?” And, it gave me a lot of pause

to stop and think: What is the purpose? What is the benefit that social media brings? What is its best application? Except under very limited circumstances, I would say that it is something that does not appear to impact us in a crisis situation.

Practitioner Jennifer worked for a corporation and had multiple incident crisis communication plans, but none included the use of social media. “We don’t use social media to communicate with anybody during a crisis,” said Jennifer.

Karla and Jennifer had different reasons for why social media was not included in their crisis communication plans. Jennifer works for a Fortune 500 company that has subsections located across the United States. She explained that it was the corporate headquarters’ role to handle social media.

Jennifer: Our corporate headquarters are in charge of communicating via social media.... Once something gets put on Facebook or Twitter, it is a national and even an international message. Our staff doesn’t have the authority to post messages at those levels. We deal with local media. Even if it was as simple as a response to the comment on the *Baton Rouge Business Report’s* “Daily Report’s” story about us, we would not do that locally because it would be considered a national message because it’s online.

In Jennifer’s situation, she did not employ social media into her crisis communication plans because she did not have the jurisdiction to do so. Her organization’s highest level of management is in charge of everything to do with social media. Jennifer did note that her company uses social media for nonemergency communication. However, she was unaware of the headquarters intention to use social media in times of crisis. “I don’t know if they would plan to use, let’s say Twitter. There’s a person who tweets for us. She may have plans to use it in a crisis, but I wouldn’t know if she did. I would assume no,” said Jennifer.

In Practitioner Karla’s position, she does have the ability to incorporate social media in times of a crisis. She does not use it however because of the nature of her business and her publics.

Karla: I think it is the nature of our business in many ways. For instance, our radio system in our trucks has a channel frequency that basically is listen only mode. We do not want the drivers distracted in any way. They cannot talk on cell phones. They have to pull over to talk on the radio. They cannot be looking at iPhones or checking the net or checking tweets or checking Facebook. They can't be doing that while they are out on the street. It's a safety issue, and that limits its usefulness to us in communicating.

Karla's company does utilize YouTube to promote its recycling program, and the posted videos have received positive feedback. Still, Karla does not think social media incorporation in a crisis would be beneficial for her customers. "With our customers and our publics, I think that it would have limited effectiveness because of the nature of those audiences. We might be bombarding too many people with unwanted or unneeded messages," said Karla.

A large portion of the data revealed that social media was viewed as an important communication tool. However, it is still considered relatively "new." Many practitioners saw projected use for it in the future or that his/her plan needed to be updated to formally include a section on social media. Five practitioners responded that while their crisis communication plans currently did not include social media they did not exclude its use in future versions or immediate incorporation in a crisis situation:

Bob: "In terms of a formal plan, not necessarily, but in terms of it's understood that if something really major happens we will use it."

Christina: "In theory, yes. Is there a section of our operating plan that says, 'Here's how to activate Twitter' no, there is not."

Jesse: "It's [the crisis management plan] just a result of that's the climate now. That plan just needs to be updated."

Jessica: "It [social media] has projected use."

Julie: "We're definitely using it, just not in our crisis plan yet. I wanted to make sure you knew that. All of our hurricane planning does use it."

These responses indicate the newness of social media and lead to the conclusion that some organizations would be willing to use it in a crisis situation, and that their current crisis communication plans reflect time periods when social media was still in an innovative stage.

Six practitioners all included social media components into their crisis communication plans. However, it was discernable from the participants' responses that while the components were included, each practitioner had his or her own opinion as to the importance and effectiveness of social media use in a crisis situation. These varying opinions tie into research question two, which confirms the use of social media inclusion in a crisis communication plan, but test its actual use.

Research Question Two: Are Practitioners Using Social Media During a Crisis Communication Situation?

In response to this research question the answer is both "yes" and "no." While six of the interviewed practitioners included social media into their crisis communication plans, the decision to actually implement it was left to the discretion of the practitioner. Participants listed organization type, publics, and time issues regarding their use or disuse of social media in a crisis situation.

Practitioner Casey, who is with a local government enforcement agency, discussed how the first thing she would do in a crisis situation is notify the public. Even though her crisis communication plan includes the use of social media, according to Casey, "It does not play a primary role to be honest with you. I don't believe it's our most effective means of reaching our stakeholders." For Casey more traditional media techniques such as press releases e-mailed directly to the media or a call out system were her preferred crisis communication methods. "I think it [social media] could be very good in a public relations crisis, but for my agency, and

since our primary type of crisis is a public safety crisis, then it's not the most effective means," said Casey.

Many of the interviewed practitioners considered social media to be just another communication tool to incorporate along with traditional and new media methods.

Nicole: We try and use a number of different tools in the toolbox to get the message out, and since we do have a presence on Facebook and YouTube that would be another thing that we would use. For example, if we wanted to get a statement out, we could film it with our flip video and upload it to YouTube.

Data showed a consensus amongst participants that traditional methods of public relations are still vital in handling a crisis situation. "We're not getting rid of the old, but incorporating these new techniques to handle a crisis situation in the best way possible," said Kristine, a practitioner for a local university. However, data also revealed that participants strongly believed that social media components are quickly becoming tools that should not be left out. "I think if you are not using it, you're missing a bet," said Bob, a practitioner for a non-profit.

Since her public mainly consists of a younger demographic, social media components and new media were readily adopted and implemented into Kristine's crisis communication plan. Her organization has a very detailed communication plan that consist of press release templates, e-mail blasts templates, Twitter templates, mobile text message templates, and Facebook templates for a number of potential crises. Using traditional and new media tools along with a strong focus on social media allows Kristine to reach a large demographically different public in a shorter amount of time. "The immediacy of social media avenues is so important. We have issues with broadcast e-mails being so slow due to the size of our community receiving the message," said Kristine.

One self-proclaimed social media early adopter, Whitney, is a big proponent of using social media in a crisis situation. "I do think we are seeing social media being incorporated more

often now into crisis communication,” said Whitney. Her first outreach to the press and community in a crisis would be through social media. She explains that in her opinion the immediacy of social media makes the tool more newsworthy than a press release.

Whitney: It could take me 15 to 20 minutes to write a press release and get it e-mailed out. That’s kind of stretching it, but hypothetically, when the press gets it, they’re going to post it on their social media websites too. It’s easier and quicker for all of us for me to post it on my social media sites, and then they can disseminate the information from there. Because if you build your social media correctly, the media are following you as well as you are following them.

Knowing that practitioners are incorporating social media into their crisis communication plan and actually implementing social media in a crisis assist in one part of this study’s aim. In order to compose a best practice approach on incorporating social media into a crisis, it is important to see what social media components are being used by practitioners and how.

Research Question Three: How Do Practitioners Use Social Media in a Crisis Communication Situation?

The practitioners who are using social media are using it to communicate quickly, resolve issues, and develop brand loyalty. In analyzing the interviews, several themes emerged through discussions of social media and its use in crisis communication. Immediacy, brand loyalty through two-way symmetrical communication, engagement, and time constraints were mentioned multiple times in the majority of the interviews. Almost all the participants that admitted to using social media in times of crisis used the same tools. Facebook and Twitter were the most mentioned tools, but practitioners also utilized Flickr, YouTube, and blogs to communicate and respond to their publics in a crisis.

Immediacy

“The best social media tool to use in a crisis is Twitter because of the instantness of it,” said Whitney. Social media was touted throughout the interviews for its immediacy. Advocates

of social media during a crisis supported their opinions by giving examples of how through the swiftness of social media, problems could be caught and solved in minutes. Practitioner Julie, who handles communication at a fast food chain, revealed that during Hurricane Katrina communicating to her customers about the status of restaurants was extremely difficult.

Julie: Twitter would have been a great tool for us to have during Hurricane Katrina to say, “This restaurant’s open.” We are all fresh products, and the restaurants couldn’t get enough products delivered to them, and we would change the hours everyday. To be able to tweet this restaurant is open and this one is closed would have been a tremendous help. The good thing about tweeting that information too, is that we don’t want to bog down our entire Facebook page with one area’s issues. Instead we can say, check Twitter for updates on so and so restaurant.

Practitioner Nicole also mentions the quickness of social media and how after Hurricane Gustav, the immediacy of the media was appreciated.

Nicole: What we learned in Gustav was it was taking us too long to do the press release, and so I think to say, “Check our Facebook page for the latest updates,” and guide people there is quick and helpful. I think the benefit of social media is it’s quick.

Practitioner Bob believes in the power of social media through its immediacy. When it comes to crisis management, according to Bob, crafting a message quickly is one of the first steps to take in a crisis. “You need to sort through all the facts in a hurry and have a response ready because that’s one of the worst things you can do is sit on something for three or four days and not respond,” said Bob. He believes social media assist in this process because it allows an organization to send out messages momentarily as well as reaching a large audience at the same time.

Bob: We can reach more people through social media than we can on the air. We can create something and get it on Facebook and Twitter. Essentially if we put something on Facebook the same thing goes on Twitter. We can get that out within half an hour. We can reach more than 4,000 people even though it’s different degrees.

Engagement

Results revealed that many practitioners were using social media to build their publics, make relationships with them, and to work on two-way symmetrical communication. All sixteen participants were asked the question: “Do you think it is important to respond to your publics in a crisis?” All sixteen participants responded with a resolute “yes.” Social media assist with making direct connections between the practitioners and the people who define their markets. “I do think it’s important that we listen to what people are saying, and certainly it’s important to us to engage people and really help them understand that we’re their organization, and that we are here for that, and we’re a resource and that sort of thing,” said Nicole.

Practitioner Christina, a government employee, recently saw first hand the benefits of using social media during the recent BP oil spill. According to Christina, social media tools like Twitter, Facebook, and Flickr allowed her organization to interact with the public, make contact, and receive information from journalists.

Christina: Just individually, it made people feel like we were interested in their issues. It helped us keep some of the negative chatter off the public sites and into more of a private communication. It made people feel like, okay, these people are interested.

Kristine believes that responding to your publics in a crisis is important not just to disperse information, but also to receive it. “Your publics have great ideas in a crisis and can often provide you with information you may not have,” said Kristine. According to many participants, people want to engage, and using social media can make people feel like they are a part of the company and the conversation.

Brand Loyalty

Many of the interviewed participants discussed how social media could be used as a tool in a crisis to build and nurture brand loyalty. Through the use of social media monitoring,

practitioners discussed how due to the short response time social media provides, practitioners can employ two-way communication in response to the discovery of user comments and negative feedback.

Whitney explained how she had to convince her organization to implement social media in a crisis. “My research has shown that for every five negative posts that are put up online, you have the opportunity to change one of those negative users into a brand loyalist,” said Whitney. She went on to explain that when customers use social media to leave feedback, whether positive or negative, it gives the organization the opportunity to engage in two-way communication and leave a customer with a feeling of “wow they care, they responded to me, they tried to make things right.” Christina gave a great example of where social media reached an unusual public, local fishermen, and assisted them in continuing their work during a time when it was greatly hindered by the BP oil spill crisis.

Christina: I didn’t feel that we were necessarily getting beat up by people as much....I think a lot of it had to do with that two-way communication going on with people. And, we did have people, we had fishermen, someone said, “I don’t understand why you guys are putting fishing closures on Twitter. There are no fishermen who tweet.” That is a lie. We had fishermen who would send us a message saying, “You guys put a map out, but you didn’t put latitude and longitude. I need to plug it into my GPS right now.” We literally had that level of communication with people.

Whitney does warn that in order to build brand loyalty long term, it’s important for an organization to build up a social media base. Social media cannot just be implemented in a crisis. An organization needs to have already cultivated a relationship with its publics before a crisis in order to really use social media as a crisis communication tool.

Whitney: It’s important to remember that if you start using both of these [Facebook and Twitter] just in the time of a crisis you’ve failed. You have not nurtured or cultivated a relationship using these tools before the crisis. You have to incorporate social media beforehand. It’s a preventative crisis communication step.

Time Constraints

An important finding to note in regards to use of social media is the time constraints placed upon the medium. “It [social media] requires constant attention. The things that I would like to do probably should have constant attention,” said Kelly. “Even if I wanted to get more interactive with social media, sometimes I just don’t have the time.” Social media is a tool that is in constant use. When using social media, practitioners must be responsible about posting information frequently, responding to questions and comments, and communicating as one voice in order to build trust.

Practitioner Jane, who works for a government agency, employs social media components into her daily work and also, into her organization’s crisis communication plan. Jane must monitor 18 different Facebook pages that fall under her organization’s main Facebook page on top of the various job duties that come with being director of communications. She reflects on the difficulty of maintaining the organization’s social media sites due to her busy schedule.

Jane: The time management issue is starting to really raise its ugly head around here....You do want to make sure that you are not just marketing to these people, but that you are building a relationship. I don’t know that we necessarily have the time to build the relationship. So, we have to figure out a way to do it.

Another practitioner, Jessica, reiterates how social media is something that requires real time attention and consistency in order to be effective. Her small staff is limited to making the most of social media.

Jessica: People aren’t going to pay attention to our Facebook page if we only post something of interest every three weeks. We don’t necessarily have the time or the staff capacity to make meaningful posts on a regular basis. So, I feel like we’re not able to utilize that resource to its maximum potential just because we don’t have the time.

Many practitioners felt that one solution to the time management issue was to employ a person to work with an organization’s social media full-time. Budget constraints and the

unfamiliarity of social media to many upper management members were listed as reasons why this step had yet to be taken by some organizations. However, having a person that is employed to monitor social media throughout the day not only allows for its maximum use, but also assist in establishing trust, building upon relationships, and engaging one's publics.

Participant Trace is employed to monitor his organization's social media components. He even typed a protocol as part of his organization's crisis plan that explains the use of certain social media tools. He supports Jane and Jessica's previous comment about how social media is a tool that must be cultivated.

Trace: That's kind of the trick is to maintain that relationship once you establish it, because it takes a long time to establish it. It took me with my organization's page a good year and a half where people started believing what the admin was saying. Once you have it, you nurture it, and you're very careful with it and don't let it go.

Feedback showed that the immediacy of social media in a crisis is a huge advantage, but that immediacy also brings time management issues. Each participant contributed their own experiences and opinions about social media in response to the set of questions asked. Research question four looks at each participant from a demographic standpoint to see if that held any weight on his or her responses.

Research Question Four: Do Demographic Differences in Practitioners Play a Role in the Use of Social Media in a Crisis Communication Situation?

The sixteen participants in this study ranged in age from 22 to 58. There were four practitioners in their 20s, eight in their 30s, two in their 40s, and two in their 50s. The average age among the practitioners was 38 years old. Four practitioners were male and the rest female. One practitioner was African-American while the remaining participants were of Caucasian descent.

In order to gauge the practitioner’s knowledge of social media, each was asked a series of questions about their familiarity with the media type, as well as what components they used. The answers to these questions all indicated that each participant was at least “familiar” with social media. Table three shows each participant’s familiarity level. For the purposes of this study, the term familiar means that the interviewee was aware of social media and also engaged in one or more social media components at least once a month if not more frequently. It should be noted that every interview participant had a personal Facebook page.

Table Three: Participant Familiarity with Social Media

Participant	Gender	Race	Age	Organization Type	Inclusion of Social Media in Crisis Communication Plan	Familiarity with Social Media
Bob	Male	Caucasian	58	Non-profit	No (While not written into a plan, its use in a crisis was indicated.)	Familiar
Casey	Female	Caucasian	28	Government	Yes	Moderately Familiar
Christina	Female	Caucasian	31	Government	No (While not written into a plan, its use in a crisis was indicated.)	Very Familiar
Jane	Female	Caucasian	38	Government	Yes	Familiar
Jennifer	Female	Caucasian	33	Oil and Gas Corporation	No	Familiar

Table Three: continued

Jesse	Male	Caucasian	28	Business Incubator	Organization did not have a crisis communication plan.	Familiar
Jessica	Female	Caucasian	34	Non-profit	No (Projected incorporation indicated.)	Moderately Familiar
Julie	Female	Caucasian	37	Food Distribution Company	No (Included in hurricane crisis plan and currently being incorporated)	Very Familiar
Karla	Female	Caucasian	55	Private Company	No	Not Familiar
Kelly	Female	Caucasian	29	Non-profit	Organization did not have a crisis communication plan.	Very Familiar
Kristine	Female	Caucasian	38	University	Yes	Familiar
Michael	Male	Caucasian	47	Non-profit	No	Familiar
Nicole	Female	Caucasian	40	Non-profit	Yes	Familiar
Trace	Male	Caucasian	38	University	Yes	Very Familiar

Table Three: continued

Stacey	Female	Caucasian	38	Chemical Corporation	No (Projected incorporation indicated.)	Familiar
Whitney	Female	African American	22	Bank	Yes	Very Familiar

Age and gender did not seem to play any sort of defining role in the participants' incorporation of social media into a crisis communication situation. The youngest practitioner was also the only African-American female, and the oldest was a Caucasian male. Both indicated that they not only incorporated social media into their crisis communication plans, but also actively used a variety of social media components in a crisis situation. It is difficult to determine whether race played a factor in PR practitioner incorporation. Only one participant was African-American. While she was a big proponent of social media, a larger sample of African-American practitioners is needed to determine whether or not race is a contributing factor to incorporating social media into a crisis communication situation.

It would seem that the participants use social media in crisis communication situations, not from any demographic source, but rather from their own judgment of what media tools work best in communicating during a crisis. Casey served as an example of this earlier under research question number two's section. Analysis of practitioner Michael's interview revealed that while he is a big proponent of social media he realizes what media will best reach and are most desired by his organization's stakeholders.

Michael: I think it [social media] is a helpful tool nowadays in its immediacy. It is probably the quickest way to get out a message. It may not be, unless your targeted audience is really captured you are going to lose people. We have some stakeholders that don't even have e-mail. We have an advisory council that consists of stakeholders and

marketing people who come in a couple of times a year and get feedback on how we can do business with them better or make their jobs easier. So we are constantly asking them, “How can we communicate with you better?” They have told us they prefer us to communicate with them electronically.

Familiarity with social media could not be directly attributed to age since a participant of 58 years claimed to be just as “familiar” with it as a participant of 28 years. Most participants used social media in a crisis on the basis of what would be best for their organization’s publics. Research question five looks more closely at the relationship publics, which are determined by organizational type, may play in social media use in a crisis.

Research Question Five: Do Organizational Types Play a Role in the Use of Social Media in a Crisis Communication Situation?

The practitioners in this study served in communication roles throughout a variety of different business. Organizational types included one university, two corporations, three private entities, three governmental agencies, and six non-profits. It was discovered through analysis of the interviews that organizational types play a role in the use of social media through crisis communication. This conclusion was drawn from discussions about each practitioner’s publics or stakeholders. Practitioners justified their use or disuse of social media in a crisis in regards to what would be best for their publics.

Jane knows she has to balance her social media components with different audiences in a crisis. Her organization provides a service to people in all levels of socioeconomic status. Some of her publics respond better to Twitter feeds or Facebook post in a crisis, while others turn to the local news and telephone hotlines to gather the latest information.

Jane: I think that people—for us, I think that people are using our Facebook pages to get event information and schedules and planning tools.... I think that for us, because mothers are so busy, and that is our key market, I think that they just want the information, and it presented in a way that is softer and friendlier, not market toning.

Practitioner Stacey works with publics that fall into a late adopter stage. Many still turn to the television, radio, and landline phones for important crisis information with regards to her company. “Really social media is how does your community get information. I think that a lot of people are getting information that way, and so I think it’s valid. But, in our communities, it is still not the first way that they get information,” said Stacey.

Practitioner’s Crisis Communication Plans

As part of the interview process, each practitioner who did have a crisis communication plan(s) was asked if he or she would share the plan with the researcher. Fourteen participants did have crisis communication plan(s), however due to organizational confidentiality or timeliness, the researcher was only able to procure three plans. Two of the plans were from organizations that did not incorporate social media into crisis communication. The remaining plan included a very detailed structure for the use of social media during a crisis. Reviewing and comparing the plans, especially the one that included social media, assisted in the composition of the best practices approach to incorporating social media in a crisis situation (provided in the Discussion section of this study).

It was important that the researcher look for incorporations that reflected crisis communication best practices literature. All three plans contained similar crisis management approaches. Each plan started out by defining a crisis, with some going into greater detail and specifically defining a crisis as it would relate to the organization. All the plans reflected the importance of recognizing a crisis and proactively responding to it. One plan quoted, “A communications void will exist; if you don't fill it, someone else will. Acceptance of this statement is critical to effective communications management.”

Each crisis plan devoted a section to explaining the organization's crisis communication team and then setting procedures for the team to follow. One plan instructed that the first thing to do in a crisis was mobilize the organization's president and the communication director to implement the crisis communication plan and assemble the crisis communication team. From there a communication response plan was drafted, strategies and tactics were reviewed, and key audiences were identified. Another plan defined the crisis communication team's fundamental strategy as first informing employees, second, notifying elected officials and other key stakeholders, and third telling the community through as many means available including: the media, e-mails, website, even going door-to-door if needed.

It was obvious that each organization's crisis communication plan centered largely on forethought and preparation. Each plan contained templates for press releases, media policies and procedures, and spokesperson designation. The plan that did include social media incorporation was also extremely detailed and prepared for crises ranging from an active shooter situation to a meningitis outbreak to organization closure due to unexpected snowfall. This plan listed a wide variety of communication tools, which is where social media use was mainly mentioned. Media templates for broadcast e-mails, emergency hotlines and Facebook and Twitter statements were provided.

Looking through these three crisis communication plans was extremely insightful. The researcher discerned that practitioners are following crisis communication literature's suggestions. Lukaszewski (1999) notes that the most challenging part of crisis communication management is reacting quickly. The provided crisis communication plans reflect Lukaszewski's sentiment and are ready to be implemented immediately. Each plan is a quality piece of preparation for a negative unbeknownst, but inevitable occurrence.

Summary

Each participant played an important role in gaining insight into the proposed research questions. While all the practitioners described themselves as familiar with social media, a few did not believe it was a tool they should implement in a crisis situation. Other practitioners answered affirmatively to the question of social media becoming a necessity in a crisis. Although the same themes emerged throughout the interviews, each participant gave a different perspective to social media's immediacy, brand loyalty, and engagement. Together these varied responses leave the impression that practitioner demographics do not determine the use of social media in a crisis, but organizational types do. The implementation of social media in a crisis is in the hands of the practitioners as they deem fit for their publics.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Many books, plans, and theories guide and train public relations practitioners for action during and recovery after a crisis. Since social media is still a new and constantly evolving technology, there is limited information on how to use social media components in crisis management. This study aims to add to the literature and show that social media, when used correctly, can be a viable tool in crisis communication plans. By using in-depth interviews, the researcher evaluated sixteen PR practitioners and their implementation of social media in crisis communication plans and actual crisis situations. The researcher then compared these to the theoretical guidelines for successful crisis management.

Relationship of the Current Study to Prior Research

Previous literature champion's preparation, prevention, containment, recovery, and learning as important steps in preparing for, dealing with, and responding after a crisis (Coombs, 2007a; Fearn-Banks, 2002; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992). In this study, practitioners explained that the essence of the message doesn't change during a crisis and that more avenues of media can make communication more successful. Social media is an additional tool in the public relations toolbox that can assist in dealing with a crisis event. "The fundamentals of it [social media] are the same as any other media," said practitioner Karla. Traditional public relations tools like press releases and press conferences will not disappear because of social media, but only be enhanced by it.

Weick (1995) conferred that the actual crisis itself is not important, but rather the importance lies in how one deals with it. In today's world, social media cannot be ignored because the majority of the population embraces it. Whether people use it to promote events, receive news, or communicate with friends, it is a technology that is not going away, but will

continue to evolve. Practitioner Jesse commented, “You are going to get left behind. Join the club or get left behind.” Social media today now impacts crisis communication. To not incorporate social media into an organization’s crisis management is to disregard Weick’s advice and ignore a tool that can assist in reach, timeliness, and two-way communication.

Social media is a tool that fits in with crisis management. It can be implemented into each step of “traditional” crisis management, including signal detection, prevention, crisis preparation, crisis recognition, crisis containment, and recovery (Coombs, 2007a). Each practitioner interviewed accepted that social media was an emerging media tool that could not be ignored. Whether they included it into their current crisis communication plan, planned to in the future, or did not think that their organization benefitted from it, they agreed that social media only added to their range of communication tools. Some practitioners were strong supporters of social media in a crisis and believed it was a necessity to use, especially if the organization was dealing with the general public.

Organizational type did play a specific role in determining which PR practitioners incorporated social media already into their crisis communication plans. Organizations that have the general public as their main stakeholders, such as fast-food restaurants, understand how social media components make it easier for customers to complain about issues, but also know social media allows the organization to quickly contact upset customers and rectify their problems. Larger corporations are still slowly embracing social media and delegating its monitoring to corporate individuals who may not always communicate on the same level as local PR practitioners at subsidiary parts of the corporation. Universities understand that its main publics are very much tuned in to social media, and as a result, implement social media tools into crisis notifications as well as more traditional methods.

Practitioners are following the advice of prior research on crisis communication (Fink, 1986; Grunig, J. E., Grunig, L. A., & Toth, 1997; Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2007a; Zaremba, 2010). Crisis plans were reviewed that included important contacts, crisis procedures, key audiences check lists, and communication on how to use various tools such as broadcast e-mails, emergency crisis websites, press release templates, and Twitter and Facebook postings.

Practitioners realize that the first steps in a crisis should be gathering information, designating a spokesperson, and then responding with a carefully crafted message as soon as possible.

Responding to one's publics was considered the most important thing to do, because in a crisis people need information the most. Practitioner Casey said, "That's the most important thing that we or that I can do as the public information director and a public relations practitioner."

Casey's comment is a direct reflection of public relations' goal to produce two-way symmetrical communication that results in mutually beneficial relationships. Two-way symmetrical communication is about encouraging open dialogue and honest exchanges between publics. It is key to resolving conflicts and reaching compromises (Guiniven, 2002). Social media, when used correctly, is a major avenue for two-way symmetrical communication. The majority of practitioners did incorporate social media into their crisis plans and observed how it assisted them in quickly communicating one succinct message, answering their publics' questions, and even acquiring beneficial suggestions from the public. "As I was saying before about two-way communication, you need to know what they're thinking, and sometimes they have great ideas," said practitioner Kristine. Using social media in a crisis is a key tool for practitioners in conducting two-way symmetrical communication.

It is important to point out that while social media components allow for quick two-way symmetrical communication between an organization and its publics, it is not a replacement for

face-to-face interaction with the news media. The news media are vital partners of PR practitioners in a crisis. While Facebook and Twitter allow for practitioners and the media to hold textual conversations, the social media components are not a replacement for verbal and interpersonal interaction.

The members of the media must still be addressed in person during a crisis, as should any concerned or questioning individual. Social media can assist in facilitating easier communication through the news media and an organization. Practitioner Christina mentions how she used social media to reach reporters.

Christina: We decided we were just going to use it [social media] to put some information out and just see what happened. So we were just pushing press releases at first and what ended up happening was, people were following us and people would ask us questions and they would repost the information. And, we realized that when we interacted with people, we got information from journalist, we made contacts with reporters, and we setup interviews sometimes.”

While social media assist in communicating to large groups of individuals, in a crisis there are times when people need face-to-face interaction, and when 140 characters in a tweet will not cover the information the media and public need to know. Social media should not be used as a tool for ignoring or cutting out the news media. Instead it is another component to use in contacting media representatives and working with the media to provide essential information in a crisis situation.

Theoretical Implications of the Study

Two-way symmetrical communication is a key aspect of the theory of issues management. Due to the fact that social media makes communicating with one's publics easier, it also assist in the process of issues management. According to Coombs (2007a), issues management is about discovering what conditions may impact an organization and proactively working to lessen the negative impact of that issue. It's about crisis scanning and primarily

targets external publics. “When crisis turns into community events, you have to bring in issues management,” said practitioner Stacey.

Social media components are ideal tools for discovering emerging issues. PR practitioners have the capability with social media to read posts, tweets, and comments about their company or product. Social media gives an organization the opportunity to quickly respond to someone who has voiced a complaint and acknowledge his or her concern. Practitioner Julie explains how her company uses social media as an issues management tool.

Julie: Social media has given the average person an easier avenue and outlet to vent. Yes, it makes it so much easier to respond....The person’s mad right now, and you hear more constructive feedback, and you get to solve it within a few moments. A lot of the time we can fix something while they are still on the social media tool. There’s that opportunity to fix it right then, and your customers don’t stew on it longer.

With social media monitoring, a company is able to address an issue as soon as it makes itself present and potentially resolve it before it erupts into a larger problem or crisis.

Social media can be used not only proactively in the case of issues management, but reactively as well. After a crisis the theory of issues management becomes closely aligned with the theory of image restoration. During a crisis, publics voice their opinions and concerns, which are usually of a negative nature. The media can broadcast one person’s negative comment to a larger audience and dissonance can spread quickly.

Using social media during and after a crisis assists an organization in reaching a large audience. As Fearn-Banks (2007) mentioned, image restoration is not only about determining what is hurting an organization’s reputation, but also, determining what publics need to be addressed in order to restore a positive image. Social media components provide practitioners with a fast and easy way to directly communicate to concerned stakeholders and publics. Posting videos on YouTube of clean-up efforts, continuing to tweet messages about recovery resolutions,

and asking and responding to stakeholder questions on Facebook all show the public that even after a crisis, the organization is working hard to restore, rebuild, and reinforce its commitment to the community.

Conclusion

When the Internet first emerged in the 1990s, it was a one-way communication tool. Now in the year 2011, it has become a fast, interactive platform that facilitates two-way communication. The majority of the world has access to it through personal computers, smartphones, and even at businesses like Internet cafes. With social media, the news is produced differently, and people consume it differently than in the past. It is a new form of technology, and as each day goes by it becomes more commonplace. Practitioners must acknowledge social media as a certifiable communication tool, just as past practitioners adjusted from telegrams to faxes to e-mail.

Social media can and should be used in crisis management. It is a valuable tool to use in a crisis because of its immediacy, capacity to conduct one-on-one conversations, and monitoring capabilities. This study showed that practitioners are aware of social media and the benefits it can bring when used responsibly and respectfully.

The popular mantra “Tell it all, tell it fast, and tell the truth” is ingrained in many practitioners’ minds when it comes to best crisis communication practices. Social media aids practitioners in taking each of these steps during a crisis. Multiple social media components on top of traditional media outlets allow practitioners to “tell it all” to vast audiences. The immediacy, instantaneous, and real time elements of social media make “telling it fast” uncomplicated and smooth. Most importantly, social media makes “telling the truth” perspicuous. Organizations are accountable for what is posted and a record of whatever is

communicated is always available at the click of a button. Also, social media gives organizations a way to “tell the truth” by combating misinformation and dispelling rumors.

The researcher believes that it is important for PR practitioners to include social media components into their crisis communication planning. This study and the best practices included in it contribute to the growing research on crisis communication and social media. Two areas of public relations, crisis communication and the tools of social media, can be combined by practitioners and used to achieve success in their field.

Limitations of the Study

It is important to discuss the limitations in this study when determining its contribution to the field of crisis communication relative to public relations. The primary limitation of the study is that the results cannot be generalized to the entire population of public relations practitioners due to the amount of interviews conducted. Due to time constraints, only sixteen interviews were conducted, which is a small sample in terms of the number of practitioners currently employed nationwide.

Another limitation is the fact that the study was limited by location. Each practitioner interviewed worked in Baton Rouge, LA or the surrounding areas. While Baton Rouge is a large city, several participants indicated that social media might be more inclusive in crisis communication plans for organizations located in major metropolises. The depth of this study could be greatly increased by not only interviewing a larger number of practitioners, but by also expanding the reach of participants across the United States.

It is also important to note that the majority of participants held upper-management positions in their organization. The time demands on their job positions could have affected their familiarity with social media since many participants mentioned how their busy schedules kept

them from becoming more familiar with social media tools. The majority of participants were Caucasian females, which also may have skewed results.

Recommendations for Future Study

Recommendations for future research include the design of a larger qualitative study that interviews more diverse practitioners from across the nation. A quantitative study, such as a national e-mail survey, could be a more convenient way to reach a larger and more diverse sample of public relations practitioners. However, the researcher believes that qualitative research, specifically interviews and the inclusion of focus groups, give valuable insight into the knowledge and experience of each participant. Participants interviewed for this study expanded on organizational crises they had experienced and the lessons they learned from these incidents. Important information such as this might be lost in an e-mail survey that limits participants to select answers. Future researchers might also consider interviewing crisis communication experts about their opinions and use of social media. These expert opinions could deliver new insight into how crisis communication is developing theoretically.

Professional Application to Using Social Media in a Crisis

The ultimate intention of this thesis is to study the emergence of social media in crisis communication situations and provide a best practice approach for using social media in times of emergency. The information gathered in the sixteen interviews not only provided a wealth of information on practitioners' thoughts about social media and crisis communication, but also allowed the researcher to compare crisis communication plans and personal crisis experiences. Using best practice approaches from participants along with current crisis communication literature, the researcher presents a best practice approach for incorporating social media into crisis communication.

Social Media and PR Practitioners

Social media communication is a field that now falls under the realm of public relations. Currently many organizations place the monitoring and utilization of social media on the plate of the organization's PR practitioner or communicator. Some organizations even hire communicators to serve as full-time social media administrators. While this is an added component to a practitioner's already diverse and vast occupation, there is no person more qualified for the role.

The person who manages an organization's social media is critical because he or she is serving as the voice of that organization. Social media administrators must be excellent writers, who can encourage and engage in communication with the public. Especially during a crisis, they must be able to respond quickly but with a message that is approved and carefully crafted.

One Voice through One Monitor

As with any communication delivered in a crisis, it is important to have one key message and one person delivering that message. This was stressed in the organizational crisis plans provided by interview participants. Identifying one spokesperson is important because it ensures consistency of the message. The same is especially true for social media. In order for communication to be successful through social media there must be one monitor/communicator who is also the sole administrator.

When it comes to determining the person who will serve as the crisis spokesperson through social media it should be the person that serves as the social media administrator on a normal basis. This is important for two reasons. The first is that, as mentioned previously, the administrator is a communicator who can monitor, know when to respond, and respond in a correct and appropriate way.

The second reason stems from credibility. The social media administrator has already built a relationship with an organization's social media publics. The publics identify with the administrator, feel there is a personal identity there, and trust the information provided.

Proactive through Social Media

Much crisis communication literature today advocates the importance of signal detection and preparation (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Coombs 2007a). Many one-on-one and multiple-person conversations today occur on the Internet through social media components such as Facebook, Twitter, and Foursquare. Social media tools are a beneficial way to prevent future crises by proactively monitoring these sites for potential issues.

Utilizing social media tools such as TweetDeck, CoTweet and HootSuite allows a practitioner to monitor what is being said about one's organization on various sites, blogs, and threads. Companies can setup lists of key words to follow, track mentions of brand names, and follow public conversations about themselves. Monitoring one's organization, brand, services, and products through these tools helps prevent future crises that might erupt from a customer complaint or product defect.

Incorporate Social Media Now

Both practitioners who used and did not use social media in crisis communication agreed that for social media to be a beneficial tool during an actual crisis, it must be established beforehand. The trend today is that more and more people regardless of age are turning to social media avenues to connect with people, express their opinions, and follow it for news and information. Several practitioners interviewed believed that social media was the medium people were most comfortable with, or that its components were where people receive their information today.

Companies that communicate to their audiences through social media in good times, and not just in bad, establish loyalty and trust and build a relationship that involves two-way symmetrical communication. However the continuity of social media makes it a tool that must be nurtured. If an organization has never used social media or does not regularly update its social media components, turns to the medium during a crisis there will be no public for them to reach.

During a crisis an organization does not have the time to draw in an audience through social media. One benefit of using social media during a crisis for an organization that implements social media regularly is that it already has a dedicated audience that is ready to hear its message. Practitioners who were very familiar and strong proponents of social media also mentioned how when used correctly not only are an organization's publics following it, but the media are as well.

Summary

These practices are the researcher's expert conclusions as a result of the in-depth interviews conducted with PR practitioners. Their experiences in crisis situations, use of social media outside and during a crisis, and positions on social media as a communication tool lead the researcher to recommend this plan. Through this study, the researcher concludes that a best practice approach to the use of social media in crisis communication involves the following: having a trained public relations professional serve as the online administrator, making that administrator the sole communicator on social media components in a crisis, proactively monitoring its components, and establishing social media before a crisis. This plan is a new tool for academics and practitioners in the mass communication field. It is built on expert literature and the professional experiences of PR practitioners. It should be used to understand how and why social media must be incorporated into crisis communication planning.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Define a crisis for your organization.
2. What do you think is the first thing that your organization should do in a crisis?
3. What types of things does your organization do to prevent a crisis?
4. Does your organization have a crisis management plan?
5. How does your organization use issues management in its crisis management plan?
6. Does the plan include the use of social media?
7. Would you share your crisis management plan with me?
8. During a crisis, how does your organization respond?
9. Does your organization use social media in a crisis situation? If so, how?
10. Do you think it is important to respond to your publics in a crisis?
11. Do you think social media has made reaching/responding to your publics in a crisis easier?
12. Do you scan social media components for your company's name during a crisis?
13. Does your organization use a social media monitoring company?
14. Do you think social media is a necessity to use in a crisis?
15. How does social media fit into the traditional models of public relations?
16. Has your organization's crisis management changed as a result of social media?
17. How familiar are you with social media?
18. What components of social media do you use, if any?
19. Have you ever received any sort of professional education, such as a college class, on what is social media? and how to use it?
20. Do you use social media as a normal part of your job function?
21. How does your organization use social media?

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Research Participant Information and Consent Form Louisiana State University Manship School of Mass Communication

Study Title: Evaluating the use of social media by public relations practitioners during a crisis situation

Principal Investigator: Dr. Nicole Smith Dahmen

Other Investigators: Elizabeth Tadie-Canfield, graduate student

Participant's Printed Name:

We invite you to take part in a research study, which seeks to evaluate the use of social media by public relations practitioners during a crisis situation. Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary. We urge you discuss any questions about this study you may have. If you decide to participate you must sign this form to show that you want to take part.

Section 1. Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research study is to investigate the emergence of social media in crisis communication situations and organize the findings into a best practices approach to using new technology in times of emergency.

Approximately 15-20 people in the southern gulf coast area will take part in this research. Individuals will vary in age, gender and race, as will their vocational types, such as not for profit, corporation, or government.

Section 2. Procedures

The study will conduct structured in-depth interviews with public relations practitioners to explore responses to proposed research questions that involve social media and its use during crisis communication preparation, practice, and response.

Section 3. Time Duration of the Procedures and Study

If you agree to take part in this study, your involvement will last no more than sixty minutes.

Section 4. Benefits

Participants will receive the final conclusions of this study, which will be composed into a best practices approach for integrating social media into crisis communication.

Section 5. Risks

The researchers perceive that there are no known risks associated with participation in this study. However, if potential subjects perceive any associated risk, they have the right to refuse to participate. Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.

Section 6. Privacy

Results of this study may be published and may include participants' first names, work position title, and employer type. You will not be identified by full name, social security number, and address or phone number. Your place of work will only be identified by its type of organization. The recorded interviews will be transcribed for thesis research and all files (both audio and document) will be kept secured by the researchers.

Section 7. Contact Information for Questions or Concerns

You have the right to ask any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, complaints or concerns, contact:

Dr. Nicole Smith Dahmen
(225) 578-2095
ndahmen@lsu.edu

Elizabeth Tadie-Canfield
(225) 270-4293
etadie1@tigers.lsu.edu

For more information about participation in a research study and about the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a group of people who review the research to protect your rights, please visit the LSU IRB's website at <http://www.research.lsu.edu/irb/>. Included on this web site, under the heading "Research Participants", you can access federal regulations and information about the protection of human research participants. If you have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, contact Robert C. Mathews, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu.

Signature and Consent/Permission to be in the Research

Before making the decision regarding enrollment in this research you should have:

- Discussed this study with an investigator,
- Reviewed the information in this form, and
- Had the opportunity to ask any questions you may have.
-

Your signature below means that you have received this information, have asked the questions you currently have about the research and those questions have been answered.

Participant: By signing this consent form, you indicate that you are voluntarily choosing to take part in this research.

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name

APPENDIX C: APPLICATION FOR EXEMPTION FROM INSTITUTIONAL OVERSIGHT

Application for Exemption from Institutional Oversight

Unless qualified as meeting the specific criteria for exemption from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight, ALL LSU research/ projects using living humans as subjects, or samples, or data obtained from humans, directly or indirectly, with or without their consent, must be approved or exempted in advance by the LSU IRB. This Form helps the PI determine if a project may be exempted, and is used to request an exemption.

– Applicant, Please fill out the application in its entirety and include the completed application as well as parts A-E, listed below, when submitting to the IRB. Once the application is completed, please submit two copies of the completed application to the IRB Office or to a member of the Human Subjects Screening Committee. Members of this committee can be found at <http://www.lsu.edu/screeningmembers.shtml>

– A Complete Application Includes All of the Following:

(A) Two copies of this completed form and two copies of part B thru E.

(B) A brief project description (adequate to evaluate risks to subjects and to explain your responses to Parts 1&2)

(C) Copies of all instruments to be used.

*If this proposal is part of a grant proposal, include a copy of the proposal and all recruitment material.

(D) The consent form that you will use in the study (see part 3 for more information.)

(E) Certificate of Completion of Human Subjects Protection Training for all personnel involved in the project, including students who are involved with testing or handling data, unless already on file with the IRB. Training link: (<http://php.nhtaining.com/users/login.php>.)

(F) IRB Security of Data Agreement: (<http://www.lsu.edu/irb/IRB%20Security%20of%20Data.pdf>)



Institutional Review Board
Dr. Robert Mathews, Chair
131 David Boyd Hall
Baton Rouge, LA 70803
P: 225.578.8692
F: 225.578.6792
irb@lsu.edu
lsu.edu/irb

1) Principal Investigator: Nicole Smith Dahmen

Rank: Assistant Professor

Dept: Mass Communications

Ph: (225) 578-2095

E-mail: ndahmen@lsu.edu

2) Co Investigator(s): please include department, rank, phone and e-mail for each

Elizabeth Tadle-Canfield, Graduate Student, Mass Communications, 225-270-4293, etadle1@tigers.lsu.edu

IRB# E528D LSU Proposal #

☒ Complete Application

☒ Human Subjects Training

3) Project Title: Evaluating the use of social media by public relations practitioners during a crisis situation

Study Exempted By:
Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairman
Institutional Review Board
Louisiana State University
203 B-1 David Boyd Hall
225-578-8692 | www.lsu.edu/irb
Exemption Expires: 10-27-2013

4) Proposal? (yes or no) No

If Yes, LSU Proposal Number

Also, if YES, either

☐ This application completely matches the scope of work in the grant

OR

☐ More IRB Applications will be filed later

5) Subject pool (e.g. Psychology students)

Professional Public Relations Practitioners

*Circle any "vulnerable populations" to be used: (children <18; the mentally impaired, pregnant women, the aged, other). Projects with incarcerated persons cannot be exempted.

6) PI Signature

Nicole Dahmen

Date

12/28/10

(no per signatures)

** I certify my responses are accurate and complete. If the project scope or design is later changes, I will resubmit for review. I will obtain written approval from the Authorized Representative of all non-LSU institutions in which the study is conducted. I also understand that it is my responsibility to maintain copies of all consent forms at LSU for three years after completion of the study. If I leave LSU before that time the consent forms should be preserved in the Departmental Office.

Screening Committee Action: Exempted X Not Exempted _____ Category/Paragraph _____

Reviewer

Lisa Lundy
RLM

Signature

Lisa Lundy

Date 10/28/10

Application for Exemption from Institutional Oversight

Part D: Consent form for a non-clinical study to be signed by all participants

**Research Participant Information and Consent Form
Louisiana State University
Manship School of Mass Communication**

Study Title: Evaluating the use of social media by public relations practitioners during a crisis situation

Principal Investigator: Dr. Nicole Smith Dahmen

Other Investigators: Elizabeth Tadie-Canfield, graduate student

Participant's Printed Name:

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Section 2. Procedures

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If you agree to take part in this study, your involvement will last no more than sixty minutes.

Section 4. Benefits

Participants will receive the final conclusions of this study, which will be composed into a best practices approach for integrating social media into crisis communications.

Section 5. Risks

The researchers perceive that there are no known risks associated with participation in this study. However, if potential subjects perceive any associated risk, they have the right to refuse to participate. Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.

Section 6. Privacy

Results of this study may be published and may include participants' first names, work position title, and employer name. You will not be identified by full name, social security number, and address or phone number. The recorded interviews will be transcribed for thesis research and all files (both audio and document) will be kept secured by the researchers.

Section 7. Contact Information for Questions or Concerns

You have the right to ask any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, complaints or concerns, contact:

Dr. Nicole Smith Dahmen
(225) 578-2095
ndahmen@lsu.edu

Elizabeth Tadie-Canfield
(225) 270-4293
etadie1@tigers.lsu.edu

For more information about participation in a research study and about the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a group of people who review the research to protect your rights, please visit the LSU IRB's website at <http://www.research.lsu.edu/irb/>. Included on this web site, under the heading "Research Participants", you can access federal regulations and information about the protection of human research participants. If you have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, contact Robert C. Mathews, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu.

Signature and Consent/Permission to be in the Research

Before making the decision regarding enrollment in this research you should have:

- Discussed this study with an investigator,
- Reviewed the information in this form, and
- Had the opportunity to ask any questions you may have.
-

Your signature below means that you have received this information, have asked the questions you currently have about the research and those questions have been answered.

Participant: By signing this consent form, you indicate that you are voluntarily choosing to take part in this research.

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name

Study Exempted By:
Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairman
Institutional Review Board
Louisiana State University
203 B-1 David Boyd Hall
225-578-8692 | www.lsu.edu/irb
Exemption Expires: 10-27-2013

VITA

Elizabeth Barrow Tadie was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She is the proud daughter of Jim and Renee Tadie and the loving wife of James Blake Canfield. Elizabeth attended Louisiana State University (LSU), where she followed in her mother's footsteps and pursued a career in the field of public relations. She graduated *summa cum laude* in 2003 with a Bachelor of Arts in mass communication and a minor in French.

Following graduation, Elizabeth accepted a position as an English teacher through the American and French Embassies' Délégation générale de l'Alliance Française. She spent a year in Paris, France, and taught English to high school culinary students at the Lycée Professionnel Hôtelier Château des Coudraies. During her time abroad she travelled though Europe enjoying new cultures, masterpieces of art, and gelato.

Elizabeth returned home in 2004 and began working as a public relations professional. She decided to pursue a master's in 2006 when she began working as the public relations coordinator for the National Center for Biomedical Research and Training (NCBRT) located on LSU's campus. Elizabeth worked full-time while pursuing her Master's degree. Since leaving NCBRT in 2008, she has served as the marketing director of the Louisiana Art & Science Museum and the chief information officer at Entergy's River Bend Nuclear Power Plant. She is currently employed as the communications specialist at BASF.

Elizabeth next plans to study for her professional certification of Accredited in Public Relations. She hopes to spread her passion for the public relations field and serve as a mentor to future public relations professionals.