Navigating anger in Happy Valley: Analyzing Penn State’s Facebook-based crisis responses to the Sandusky scandal

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ABSTRACT

Social media are important channels of communication during a crisis. This study examined the use of Facebook as a crisis management tool for Pennsylvania State University during the first month of the Jerry Sandusky scandal. A content analysis of all 129 posts made by the university during that time period and 2060 comments to the posts suggested that audience reaction to crisis information varies based on crisis response strategy, sources cited, and topics shared. This study has implications for social media crisis management models.

Those who live in State College, Pennsylvania are accustomed to swelling crowds on football Saturdays when the iconic Beaver Stadium is packed to its 107,000-seat capacity. However, a different kind of crowd moved into town when former assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky was indicted on 40 criminal counts of alleged child sexual abuse on November 5, 2011. The news set off a firestorm of activity around the usually quiet “Happy Valley” and the town quickly filled with visiting media members (Manuel, 2011). Internally, students, faculty, staff, alumni, and other university stakeholders waited with growing impatience to discover how the institution would handle the crisis; many argued they handled it poorly (Fiske, 2011; Manuel, 2011; Zinser, 2011).

As Sandusky headed for his official booking, investigators explored which university officials were aware of the allegations. Long-time head coach Joe Paterno and university president Graham Spanier quickly lost their jobs amid rumors of a cover up (CNN Library, 2016). Top administrators stepped down from their positions. Students notoriously rioted at news of the Paterno firing, but within days stood thousands strong at a candlelight vigil honoring the alleged victims (Mountz, 2011). During the first week, the university was criticized for its general silence, something that one Penn State professor called “a major error in effective crisis communications” (Manuel, 2011 p. 1). By the time Sandusky was convicted of 45 counts of sexual abuse in June 2012, Paterno had passed away from a battle with cancer and the independent university investigation known as the Freeh Report was on the verge of release (Drape, 2012; Perez-Pena, 2012). The Freeh Report, the university’s independent investigation into the events leading up to the scandal, suggested top leaders (including Spanier and Paterno) showed “total and consistent disregard” (Freeh Report, 2012 p. 14) toward allegations. Leadership failures, born out of a secretive and unaccountable organizational culture, ultimately led to a decades-long cover-up of abuse (McGregor, 2012). Although the sanctions were lifted by January 2015, the Freeh Report initially led to the NCAA handing out unprecedented sanctions against the program: a $60 million fine, a four-year postseason ban, the loss of 20 annual scholarships, and the vacating of all wins from 1998 to 2011—a move that lost Paterno the record of winningest coach in NCAA Football history (CNN Library, 2016).

Years later, the scandal continues to plague the university. Penn Staters still feel the repercussions of the university’s actions (Layden, 2014), and court battles continue among involved parties including former administrators, the State of Pennsylvania, the
stretched back to the 1970s and across various coaching staffs (Hobson & Boren, 2016). Simultaneously, the university contended with how the original $59.7 million settlement would be paid (Mattioli, 2016). Although the university planned to pay the settlement with insurance money, its costs had risen to approximately $93 million, suggesting payment might come from tuition or tax monies. And as recently as February 2017, the university and its former administrators continued to face and prepare for trials. While Penn State pushed to overturn the verdict in former graduate assistant Mike McQueary's defamation suit (Associated Press, 2017), former administrators prepared to go on trial for charges such as conspiracy to child endangerment and perjury (Miller, 2017; Thompson, 2017a). In the meanwhile, Sandusky continued to appeal his convictions. With a new judge assigned to his case, Sandusky and his new appellate attorneys argued that his original lawyer mishandled his case (Thompson, 2017b). In short, more than five years after the emergence of the scandal, the crisis did not just continue to exist—it continued to change shape and direction in ways that suggest a resolution may not be achieved for years.

Despite the longevity of this crisis and the university's ongoing need to respond to allegations of mis-management, this study focuses on the immediate response to a scandal that shocked a well-known and respected university and football program to its core. Throughout the ongoing events that marked the emergence of the scandal, the university and its stakeholders took to the official Facebook page to voice concern, support, anger, and opinions about the crisis. This study suggests an analysis of official university Facebook posts and the comments generated in the first month of the crisis can reveal some of the university's crisis communication efforts and assess responses to those efforts at the beginning of the scandal, when little information was available about the extent of the crimes and the university's involvement in covering them up. Members of the media called the scandal a "public relations catastrophe" (Zinser, 2011, p. 1), while scholars felt the slow response was made worse because the crisis "evoked issues of management and culture, morality and how big-time college athletics fits within higher education" (Fiske, 2011 p. 1; Manuel, 2011).

This quantitative content analysis of university-generated Facebook posts—and comments responding to those posts—explores which crisis response strategies the university used and how they were received by stakeholders. A brief overview of crisis communication literature, particularly situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) and the social-mediated crisis communication model (SMCC), is offered. In addition to outlining existing crisis response strategies, the importance of source and media type in crisis communication is explored. Results suggest sources and post topics were important indicators of stakeholder responses.

1. Literature review

Coombs (2012) defines 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). The emphasis on stakeholders is both implicit (stakeholder perception is organizational crisis reality) and explicit (acknowledges the importance of stakeholder expectations), making it ideal for public relations crisis communication. During crises, it is crucial to communicate with stakeholders—the groups or individuals who can affect or become affected by an organization (Bryson, 2004; Coombs, 2012). More specifically, Coombs (2012) conceives a three-stage crisis-management approach, suggesting sub-stages and corresponding actions for each phase. The first stage, precrisis, suggests taking corrective action by preventing possible crises (e.g. through issues, risk, and reputation management) and proactively preparing for potential crises. The second stage, crisis event, refers to the initiation of actual crisis, at which point steps are taken to contain it. The final stage, post crisis, focuses on organizational steps following crisis resolution. The sub-stages suggest applying knowledge gleaned from the crisis to enhance future prevention, ensuring stakeholders are aware of and have positive attitudes toward the previous management efforts, and verifying the crisis has truly passed. Arguably, the Sandusky scandal was in initial and ongoing crisis event stages at the time of analysis.

1.1. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) suggests which organizational communication responses are best received by stakeholders during crises (Coombs, 1995, 2007b; Fediuk, Pace, & Botero, 2010). SCCT posits three response types, with the first two privileging stakeholder protection: instructing information helps people physically cope with crisis fallout and adjusting information helps people psychologically cope (Coombs, 2012). Once these demands are met, the third response type, reputational repair, rebuilds organizational reputation by understanding stakeholder attributions of responsibility. Attribution theory is invoked to align repair strategies with the crisis' level of reputational threat, suggesting that as crisis-induced reputational threat increases, so should the repair strategy's accommodativeness (Coombs & Holladay, 1996, 2002; Coombs, 2012).

Attribution is grouped into three categories of perceived organizational responsibility: (1) victim-based crises (e.g. natural disasters) evoke minimal responsibility; (2) accident-based crises (e.g. technical failures resulting in accidents) evoke low responsibility; and (3) intentional/preventable crises (e.g. organizational actions create risk or violate laws) evoke high responsibility (Coombs, 2007a). While organizations are encouraged to evaluate stakeholder perceptions of crisis responsibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), the circumstances of the Sandusky scandal—including the overwhelming local and national response—implies a preventable crisis, suggesting high crisis responsibility and attribution that carried significant implications for choosing appropriate response strategies. By intersecting attribution-based theories with Image Restoration Theory, Coombs (2007, 2012) provides a framework for appropriate crisis responses.

Crisis response strategies Effective communication during crises can repair reputation and help manage negative responses (Coombs, 2007b, 2012). Coombs' specific response strategies build on Image Restoration Theory, which is grounded in apologia and examines "rhetorical self-defense" (Benoit, 1995 p. 11). Assuming "communication is a goal-directed activity" (1995, p. 63) Benoit...
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