

Insights into the evolution of 'Crisis Communications' in a social media age

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Mr. President, Mr. Secretary, and fellow members ... I am honored to be a member of this group presenting my first paper this evening.

You've heard the old adage ... "Don't pick a fight with someone who buys ink by the barrel." While a bit of a misnomer given principled standards news publications follow, the impression allowed for many egos in the news publishing business for generations to be stroked ... including this recovering publisher. Oh me ... how the times have changed. Over the last 10 years anyone with a smartphone or organization with access to the internet can have their own personal supply line to buying ink by the barrel ... or I should say, an infinite supply of 'digital ink.'

The informational world has changed with the development of the internet, smartphones, and a plethora of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and a nearly endless list. With the First Amendment in one's pocket, there is an unfiltered, no-holds-barred media platform at everyone's disposal. All it takes is an interest, an opinion, a little motive or just a sense of curiosity for someone to become a reporter, editor and publisher all wrapped in one. And the sad part ... the platform allows for the easy ability for sources to be shrouded in complete anonymity ... depending on the user's motive. There is no shortage of bad characters social media has bred. Even the well-intentional characters with nothing more than interest and their curiosity create untold layers of confusion with assumptive information or just 'liking' or 'sharing' misinformation that passes their way.

As I planned this paper, I was overwhelmed in the directions I could take involving communications through the internet and social media. There are many 'rabbit holes' to explore. The psychological ramifications alone with the glut of information we are exposed to would be an interesting topic ... though I best leave that for a later time or for someone with acutely more comprehension of the human psyche like Dr. Sivley to tackle.

I gravitated to an area my previous career afforded insights that I find captivating ... **communications during a crisis** ... a crisis defined as an 'unpredictable event.'

DON'T misinterpret what fascinates me during a crisis. Yes a crisis, by human nature, creates curiosity but what I find intriguing is how the communication itself plays out between the communicators and the recipients of the messages, how messages are interpreted and the reactions that follow. Believe me ... it is quite interesting to witness how intent is juxtaposed with interpretations. I saw it daily through the works of a local newspaper. My focus for this paper is to touch on the evolution of '**Crisis Communications' in a social media age**. And ... I very much emphasize 'touch upon' and 'evolution' ... a 30 minute talk can only skim the surface of the topic while the progression of dealing with social media continues.

Whether public officials, first responders or a spokesperson for a public or private organization ... it was not so long ago the goal was to have the right crystal ball in hand when an emergency situation arose before releasing much information. A thorough investigation could be done and the message could be relatively easy to control within a timely timeline mostly dictated by QUOTE --- "officials". The most difficult tasks seemed to be dealing with emotional parties

involved and those pesky news reporters with their onslaught of questions that were oftentimes perceived to be annoying, leading, callus and / or biased.

Any good public relations spokesperson may look back and think, those were the good old days. Today it is highly likely social media is blowing up with reports and pictures, feeding the owner's personal perspective of the incident to his or her followers along with traditional media outlets before first responders are even on the scene and certainly before an 'official' word has been released. More times than not, someone from the general public is on the scene first or at least passing by with a camera phone in hand.

For any of you active in following breaking news, you know how often this occurs. Even traditional media outlets routinely use information, quotes, photos and videos from passerby's in their own breaking coverage of an event. Though unlike the general public's push of information out into the social media world, traditional media works diligently to provide the most accurate information possible through verification with a goal of obtaining more than one source. The dilemma becomes how emergency managers, spokespersons and first responders cope with the new, real-time world of communications when essentially everyone is a reporter. Every action and comment is apt to be recorded that can live for eternity in cyberspace. Sloppy actions and off-the-cuff responses are likely to be the headlines, the lead story on the 10 o'clock news or become the next viral video with possible damaging reputational affects.

It seems every day there is someone trying to retract a comment they made in a supposedly private isolated instance ... where no media was present ... but ... guess what? Someone present was recording it. **At no time can anyone think something is not being recorded.** Just think about these staggering figures from 2018 which will cause you to pause before you speak.

- There are 5.1 billion people with mobile phones
- Nearly 3.2 billion use social media
- There are 2.2 billion using Facebook.
- 88% of Facebook users use the mobile app.
- 74% access Facebook daily.
- Twitter, though with a considerably smaller audience, boast 330 million users.
- Nearly 50% are on the platform daily.
- 80% access it through a mobile device.
- Snapchat has about 200 million users but boast that over 3.5 billion photo messages are sent every day.

What social media has allowed is for everyone to essentially control their own narrative by becoming their own media source operating with no standards or within ideologies set by personal prejudice. And while anyone can create their own narrative, what CANNOT be controlled is how the narrative is perceived, interpreted or responded to. Reactions happen within hours, minutes and even seconds, not days creating a furious pace of information, including misinformation, being parlayed.

The speed too which reactions take place among vast audiences creates a sense of urgency. From a crisis communicator's perspective, it is a near overwhelming task to monitor. The goal is to be disciplined, vetting the reactions and managing responses to correct misinformation and / or confirm factual information.

As a former publisher and editor, I have been fraught with what social media represents. Is social media the ultimate 'democratic' factor where ALL voices can be heard? Is there a misperception of social media of what it does and doesn't do? It's common to hear Facebook and other social media forms are not informational generators but rather a delivery method. While wanting to agree with this assessment --- there are times it acts as a source.

Could it be a hybrid of both? That's a thought to ponder. What it has done is create a broader avenue of two way communications with the public.

As recipients of information through social media (like any other source of information), it is imperative to be conscience about our own filters, continuously scrutinizing our biased and unbiased trust screens. Sadly, I perceive such personal examinations are the exception versus the rule. There is simply too much impetuous reactions taking place fueling misinformation and political divide.

My intent this evening is to share a progression of — mostly — local examples of how crisis communications played out before the social media age, in the midst of the social media age and surmise how these may have played out at another time.

On December 15, 1993 shortly after 5 p.m. some may recall the fatal crash killing seven Trigg County High School students. They were returning from their dinner break to Knight and Hale Game Calls where they held part-time jobs. It was a horrendous day, ever-changing the lives of many families, the school and the close knit community. It was an emotionally charged incident ... yet, instinctively it was an incident human nature curiosity kicks in. With a famished appetite for 'ANY' information, the public's receptors were elevated whether the incident directly or indirectly affected them. There was no social media factor as we know it today. Rumors flew by word of mouth but at a pace very antiquated to today's standards. What information was swirling came at a pace easily digestible. Misinformation did not create huge swaths of anxiety as verified information became available within reasonable time frames. Jim Wallace was the school superintendent. He was acutely aware of the sensitivity and emotions during this horrific situation ... yet ... he also recognized the importance of being responsive to the media and the public's desire to know. Reporters who covered this accident cite this as a good example of a well-run crisis communication plan. While timely, information was disseminated pretty much at the pleasure of the officials. The local media were producing responsible stories reporting information through various levels of verification. While misinformation inherently occurs during any emotional crisis situation, in 1993 it did not reach a broad audience quickly ... at least in comparison to today's standard. And, if there were any bad characters, they simply did not have a platform to spew their ill intent to a vast audience with any speed. The social media factor as we know it today did not play a role in what and how the crisis communications were handled.

Can you imagine how that same incident would play out today? The assumptions, accusations and misinformation traversing the internet at such velocity would create a whole different layer of undo stress for the parties involved, especially the families of the students killed. The names would have likely been named (whether correctly or incorrectly) ... maybe before all the family members were notified. The tragic photos would blanket our screens almost immediately from passerby's, building a picture in our conscience that would become the foundational picture of what happen ... rightly or wrongly. The cause and location of the accident would have been speculated with no verification leading to possible further erroneous information being assumed. Almost assuredly, alcohol, drugs and / or speed would have become a part of the online

dialogue with no verification other than someone's assumptive opinion. Then it is likely a few bad characters, probably anonymously, would add derogatory comments for various unknown motives. It would not be farfetched for groups disliking what their employer produced chiming in for political cause. Without reputable information, the full picture of the incident would never quite come clear as our minds become biased due to the distortions.

I sense social media has instilled the idea 'short-cuts' can be taken when it comes to disseminating information. The fact is, only solid and factual information provides the real story. It is the key to good crisis communications even if the details are sparse. Details can always be added at a later time that help the picture of what happen become clearer.

Another point to recognize is **no communications** will create as much malcontent as misinformation. It is human nature to fill an informational void. In July 2010, an accident leading to the eventual death of an employee at Brazeway, a factory in the industrial park occurred. Social media was starting to ramp up but still not at the iconic levels we think of today. I personally received a few emails followed by phone calls from irate individuals making accusations the New Era was purposely covering up the accident at the factory since nothing had been published for several days. The fact was, the company had taken the individual to the hospital directly. Nothing had come across the police scanner nor were there any public records on calls to the emergency operation center or that first responders were dispatched. With no information out in the community, the information void was being filled by those within a closer circle with some knowledge of the accident. Naturally the worst was imagined with outrageous stories and allegations being spun regarding the company as well as the New Era.

While a quick call could have been made to the local facility, I knew one of the executives who had recently moved to the corporate offices in Michigan. I shared the messages received and the rumors spreading. He shared some facts as well as explained their focus had been strictly on the family admitting no thought was given to providing a public statement. Within hours after my call a news release was sent and lengthy interview given with stories in the paper and radio following the next day. It was several days after the accident but the audience began to get a clearer picture of the occurrence. The rumors settled and it was probably the one and only time I received a call of apology from a previous irate caller.

Again, how would this have played out in today's social media age? First ... there would have been a relentless persecution of the company taking place immediately if they had not issued an official statement early in the affair. If they had remained quite as long as they had, long term public relations damage may have been done accusing them of being a terrible company with an unsafe working environment. And while unintentional from well-wishers of the deceased, comments and accusations posted would likely have been hurtful to the family.

We have many members tonight who deal everyday with the court of law but how easily is it forgotten about the court of public opinion that can play into astounding effects positively and negatively within a crisis situation. I have a couple of examples to share later of how parents of students involved in separate incidents worked diligently through social media to influence public opinion.

With the recent shooting of Hopkinsville police officer Jeremy Davidson, it conjures up memories of the fatal shooting of Hopkinsville police officer Philip Meacham last March 29. This was an emotional incident playing out before our eyes in real time. Social media was intensely entwined in the information circling about from every imaginable source.

How did social media affect the overall communications from officials ... hurt or help? How prepared were public officials able to respond and / or use social media (as well as communicate with traditional media)?

What I share are thoughts and perspectives gathered from my knowledge as a publisher and editor covering the incident as well as from discussions with the police chief, the mayor, the New Era's lead reporter and a former tenured editor.

What I share is not to be interpreted in any way as critical but simply observations about how communications played out.

On the plus side, the suspect's mugshot was disseminated quickly and it spread rapidly on social media. The community itself became a valuable source to help find someone. Law enforcement agencies / officers, including those outside the community such as in Clarksville, didn't have to wait on an official email with the information. Most people participating through social media wanted to help in some way ... provide food, share their prayers and show respect, etc. HPD monitored social media and learned quickly people needed a physical place to pay their respect that led to creating a makeshift memorial relatively quickly in front of the station.

On the negative side, there was a rush to put out a narrative that was a little too specific. The account about a police impersonator attempting to pull Meacham over was premature (and as later learned, inaccurate). It was an obvious detail people gravitated to. The account took off and permeated through the online discussion. It caused a lot of confusion and hurt in the end because the story was not what happened. Though as a side note, based on the radio call about a flashing blue light, it is understandable why they believed this account initially. It seems HPD and the Kentucky State Police were never really able to change that narrative. Facts would have been better than assumptions. The message probably should have been more on the lines the officer saw a blue light flash, but we're unsure why or the circumstances.

As I look back recalling how communications played out I question the timing of some of the information being released. Statements were made to Nashville news organizations before any of the local media that then became shared widely on social media. One official stated Meacham had died before police wanted that released. Another official, very early in the case, shared that Meacham's daughter was in the car. While these particular comments were factual and originated from public officials, they were not individuals directly involved in the case. Yet, the public viewed and perceived the information as QUOTE --- the official word. The information spread rapidly through social media providing a foundation for continued speculation in the local community as to what happened and the timeline it happened. Obviously these details were newsworthy, but perhaps a place where more context should have been added as well as an exercise in patience before releasing. This is a prime example for the importance of having a calm individual who can put aside their emotions be the spokesperson.

The communication boils down to "*what does our community absolutely need to know right now (in a crisis), and what can wait so as to not create confusion?*" Details can always be added. Given the amplifying effect of social media, inaccurate details can rarely be taken back. The community has a need to know, but maybe not every detail immediately, especially in a crisis with so many variables and uncertainties spinning.

Acknowledgement of questions and concerns and letting people know you are providing what you can, when you can, then following up, is a good practice for public officials and agencies.

People need to feel there is an open communication line with nothing to hide. This also means addressing concerns that are spreading in comments or other posts online. A word of caution is heeded — care needs to be instituted in responses. Reactions within the social media world can take a life of its own. You can and will lose control of the responses. This where discipline is required. The best advice is to treat social media very much the same as traditional media using the exact information.

There is only so much preparation that can be in place for a situation such as a fatal shooting of a police officer. HPD was as prepared as any organization could be and I believe overall they managed the use of social media well. I believe they also worked well with the numerous journalist from the many news outlets across the region. Once KSP took over the case, the ebb and flow of information seem to slow dramatically which is typical based on my former news room's past experience.

And ... for the record ... as far as I know, the Kentucky State Police still has not provided an official account of the incident to the public. While this is likely to stir up emotions when it is released, I think not releasing the 'official' report is detrimental to the community. The absence of the account gives cause for an outstanding 'trust issue.' A public perception is what are they trying to hide?

Social media is making an impact as to how and what is communicated.

Looking at the influence of social media on society, an argument can be made it has become a catalyst for generating or exasperating crisis situations that may not have been otherwise.

Let me explain ... Social media has provided a mechanism for issues and events to be brought quickly to the conscience on a national level. There are many examples I could share but I gravitate to a fairly recent one with a Kentucky connection involving Covington Catholic High School. For those needing a little refresher on this incident, a group of high school students from Covington Catholic mocked a Native American man after the *March for Life* rally in Washington, D.C. back in January. A columnist from the Cincinnati Inquirer best describes the illustration I make — *"Americans were ready to ruin a bunch of teenagers' lives based on watching a short video posted by a someone — an everyday anyone — on the vast wasteland of social media. That someone's video, which surfaced on Saturday, showed a bunch of Make America Great Again -hat wearing, Covington Catholic High School boys crowded around a drum-beating Native American man and mocking his tribal chants on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. No other context. No full story. Whatever's on the Facebook cesspool is gospel truth. Who cares about good old-fashioned context and both sides of the story?"*

I don't insinuate a mundane event took place but I am suggesting the aftermath of a social media post created or at the very least exasperated a crisis event for several parties that would not likely have occurred without the amplifying effects of social media.

What if this had happen twenty-five years ago? Someone may have witnessed the incident, maybe taken photos or recorded it on their "camcorder," called a reporter or written a letter to the editor, read by a local or regional group and then followed up by reactions from the audience and / or further news reports. Even if a television crew had been on hand videoing this that made the 6 o'clock news ... what outrage that may have occurred would have taken place over days or weeks allowing for the full story to surface before nerves of outrage were touched. The emotional conscience on a large scale would have been very different, likely very small and may

never have reached a critical mass. Today that incident reached a national conscience within hours, certainly within less than a day. It is if the furor of the social media reaction that fashioned the crisis itself for the parties ... the high school boys as well as the media ... for their "*perceived*" actions ... or in this case, "*reactions*," but only after the video went viral in less than 24 hours.

In the book "The Sun Is Still Rising: Politics Has Failed But America Will Not," by Scott Rasmussen, science has shown that only 40 percent of what we see comes through our eyes. 60 percent comes from what we *expect to see*. So when pictures and stories of the encounter on the National Mall began circulating, liberals and conservatives both saw what they wanted to see. This paper is not to discuss the issue from a political perspective but to share an example of how social media has changed the landscape in the crisis communications environment. The lines are becoming blurry in the social media world. People are being pushed to the margins. Bad characters are around purposefully trying to create misinformation, whether for political gain or simply to profit from the flowing "*misinformation*." Rather than reserving judgment until the facts are known, these obsessed activists look only for symbols to see if someone is on their team or the other team. Once that's decided, nothing else matters. Additional information is then useful only if it helps make the case for their side. Is social media fast becoming a breeding ground for the margins where these fringes are getting most of the attention? I may be naive, but I am beginning to sense the majority who are not on the fringes are beginning to temper their online / social media engagement. The rest of us, including traditional media need to recognize this and lessen the credence we provide to these fringes. In time ... something will give and a new platform will emerge. Just an intuition.

Ironically ... (though not to Mr. Turner's surprise) there is a local connection involving the Covington Catholic High School incident that illustrates this point of bad characters seeking political or profiting gain. The first reports streaming out about the main student involved was named Michael Hodges (which turned out later to be incorrect). However even during the short time frame this name was mentioned, social media trolls keyed in on that name as a high school student in Kentucky. Guess what? There is a student named Michael Hodges at University Heights Academy who I was told was indiscriminately attacked through social media over the weekend of the incident by people emotionally outraged ... with an obvious political agenda or an intent to profit from the drama.

As I wrap up, I share two examples where social media was purposely used to incite public opinion, influence the engagement of traditional media and became a problem for public spokespersons.

One late afternoon in May 2015, an officer was providing a field break for his K-9 partner. They were on the grounds of Millbrooke Elementary. It was well after school hours but a young child darted around the back of the building and the K-9 ended up biting the child. In another incident, within a couple of weeks of school starting this past August, a high school student wearing a shirt deemed inappropriate by school officials lead to a scuffle and ultimately the arrest of the student. While these two incidents are vastly different, there were similar motives behind the blitz of postings and comments by the parents involved which was namely to sway public opinion to their side while making the authorities look bad. There seem to be a secondary motive as well — attract the attention of the traditional media to cover the story ... which it did. Their intent was obvious ... build a public case to help their inherent legal battles that would likely follow. From a crisis communication perspective in communicating to the public, these

were rough situations that looked embarrassing on the surface. There were limits to the information they could provide publicly. Legal parameters bound their actions due to confidentiality factors regarding personnel, i.e., students, police officers and teachers. These are two perfect examples of where the court of law and court of public opinion collided head on but is a factor in virtually all crisis communications. The public views the lack of official statements as if officials were trying to hide or ignore the situation. Both incidents did in fact attract the attention of traditional media, some national and international as far as the shirt story. It was an uncomfortable public relations matter ... and for the record ... I and the New Era were castigated for reporting the story. Though in discussion with one of the public spokespersons involved, it was admitted traditional media ultimately allowed for some type of verified story to be told. Readers eventually realized the parent's intent that lead to the social media outcry and negative public opinion forming to dissipate for the most part.

I admit, I have taken a more negative view point toward social media, particularly dealing with crisis communications this evening. Maybe it is an inherent biased developed from my previous career where there are strong efforts to verify information through more than a single source, be as accurate as possible and acknowledge and correct errors when found. An analogy of the emerging social media world would be like developing the wild, wild west. Regulations and laws were pretty much interpreted at the whim of the individual or small clutches of people.

Yes ... there are positive roles it plays. Social media allows government and organizations to earn more trust with more direct communications with the public ... IF it is transparent, accurate and accessible. Information passing through acts as news tips for traditional media and public safety organizations. And ... it is a means to move information at incredible speed.

Overall social media's tendencies lean on the side of distortion creating great divisional divides. An emotional crisis event only accentuates these effects.

In an odd way, while social media creates an amplifying affect reaching huge audiences rapidly ... with near simultaneous reactions, the affects seem to dissipate as quickly. It is if it is IDEAL for our *attention deficit society*. Emotional crisis seem to come and go swiftly.

The gist is when it comes to crisis communications in the social media world, speed and frequency are key. No longer will the public accept the slow and unresponsive onsite investigations. All responding agencies must provide timely, factual and frequent information as the event unfolds. Facts need to be validated and rumors dispelled as quickly as possible. At the same time, care must be given to the message. Responses can take a life of their own. NEVER LIE ... even if information is known but can't be revealed at the time. Be honest with the public. Always assume every comment and action will go viral, even if it doesn't because there is an infinite supply of digital ink at someone's disposal.