Managing Turbulence in the Blogosphere: Evaluating the Blog-Mediated Crisis Communication Model with the American Red Cross

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Through interviews with 40 American Red Cross communication professionals, this study examines how an organization that frequently responds to crises proactively manages on- and offline communication before, during, and after crises. The results provide the first empirical evaluation of an emerging model: the blog-mediated crisis communication model (BMCC). The lessons shared by the American Red Cross are insightful for researchers to understand the process of blog-mediated crisis communication in the nonprofit sector, which are also relevant for other public relations professionals. The findings support components of the original BMCC model, but also clearly indicate important revisions, including renaming the model the social-mediated crisis communication model (SMCC).

In the past 4 years, adult presence on social networking sites has more than quadrupled (Lenhart, 2009). In the United States alone 1.4 blogs on average are created every second and 1.5 million blog posts are made every day (Sigfry, 2007). During crises even more people read blogs (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2006) and, in some cases, publics assign a higher level of credibility to blog crisis coverage than to traditional mass media crisis coverage (Horrigan & Morris, 2005; Sweester & Metzgar, 2007).

Despite the increasing popularity and presence of social networking sites and blogs, only a handful of studies have examined how crises affect how organizations use the Internet (e.g., Liu, 2010; Taylor & Kent, 2007; Taylor & Perry, 2005). In particular, the blogosphere has only been studied on a smaller scale as a crisis-response tool (e.g., Sweester & Metzgar, 2007), rather than as a proactive tool employed before, during, and after crises occur.

Thus, this is the first study to empirically evaluate an emerging model for managing the blogosphere throughout the crisis lifecycle: the blog-mediated crisis communication model (BMCC; Jin & Liu, 2010). Grounded in blog-mediated crisis communication, opinion
Crisis Response, Rumor Leadership, Word-of-Mouth Communication, and Rumor/Crisis-Response Research, this Model Helps Public Relations Professionals Monitor and Respond to Influential Bloggers Before, During, and After Crises Occur.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

In this study, the BMCC model is evaluated in the nonprofit sector through the lens of 40 communication professionals, given that nonprofits lead the way in adopting social media tools (Barnes & Mattson, 2008; “Nonprofit groups outpace,” 2009; Sachoff, 2009; Waters, 2009). Specifically, this study evaluates the model through in-depth interviews with American Red Cross employees charged with delivering and/or managing social media communication.

The American Red Cross is the ideal organization for the first empirical application of the BMCC model because it is one of the top five strongest nonprofit brands in the United States (Preston, 2009) and it frequently manages various crises. Also, the American Red Cross is one of the forerunners in using social media to engage in conversation with its publics by solving problems, showing appreciation to donors, and encouraging people to become passionate about its mission (Society for New Communication Research, 2008).

INFLUENCES OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Within the past several years, social media have become a cultural phenomenon that has changed how all organizations manage crises online. Despite this reality there is a lack of research-based guidelines on how to effectively manage social media efforts in general and as a crisis management function in particular. Specifically, many of the existing studies focus on outcome measures, and not on the preceding, proactive measures crisis managers can take beforehand to monitor social media channels (e.g., Choi & Lin, 2009; Stephens & Malone, 2009). Additionally, though there are many case study examples of how crisis managers can employ social media practices (e.g., Choi & Lin, 2009; Liu, 2010), there is an absence of a theoretical framework that professionals can use to effectively manage social media as a crisis management function.

Definitions

Before reviewing the literature relevant to this study, there are five definitions that are at the core of this study’s focus: issues, crises, social media, blogs/microblogs, and blog-mediated crisis communication. An issue is as a “contestable point, a difference of opinion regarding fact, value, or policy, the resolution of which has consequences for the organization’s strategic plan and future success or failure” (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, p. 93). A crisis is the “perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2007, p. 2–3). It is especially important for crisis managers to monitor issues that emerge online because these issues can take dramatic turns and multiply more quickly than issues that emerge offline (Coombs, 2008). Social media are the “various electronic tools, technologies, and applications that facilitate interactive communication and content exchange” (Booz Allen Hamilton, 2009, p. 1). Blogs and microblogs
are one type of social media and are personal publishing or content management systems on the
Internet at which an author or multiple authors can publish information on a variety of topics
(Wright, 2006).

Finally, blog-mediated crises are crises that are either initiated by a blog (or blogs) or intensi-
fied by communication transmitted through blogs (Jin & Liu, 2010). Blog-mediated and
traditional crises are similar in that both are an ongoing dialogue between organizations managing
 crises and their publics prior to, during, and after crises occur (Jin & Liu, 2010). The goals of
managing blog-mediated and traditional crises can include (a) proactively identifying issues that
may become crises, (b) mitigating the negative effects of crises on publics, (c) restoring normalcy
to impacted publics after a crisis occurs, and (d) and regaining/repairing an organization’s
reputation when necessary.

Effective Use of Social Media by Crisis Managers

Given that organizations have just recently begun using social media to address crises (Booz
Allen Hamilton, 2009), it is not surprising that few academic studies exist despite the increasing
value such research would provide crisis managers. This limited research on social media and
crises can be divided into two primary research streams: (a) case studies and (b) longitudinal
tracking of how organizations integrate the Internet into their crisis communication responses.

The first stream, the case studies, highlights the challenges and best practices of organizations
that use social media and the Internet to respond to crises (e.g., Choi & Lin, 2009; Stephens &
Malone, 2009). Scholars have found that individuals are increasingly turning to several different
types of new media because no single medium can meet all of their needs during a crisis (Carey,
2002). In particular, publics increasingly seek out blogs for crisis information, perhaps because
bloggers can circumvent the traditional mass media and communicate directly with publics (e.g.,
Johnson & Kaye, 2007; Procopio & Procopio, 2007). When organizations engage in blogging,
publics’ perceptions change about the crisis and they do not believe the crisis to be as serious
(Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Furthermore, the credibility publics assign to external blogs does
not differ between those who frequently use blogs and those who use blogs less frequently
(Sweester & Metzgar, 2007).

Additional case studies found a significant relationship between certain emotions, such as
confusion and the reputation of an organization, and used these findings to expand the situational
crisis communication theory (e.g, Choi & Lin, 2009; Stephens & Malone, 2009). For example,
examining various informational materials (including blogs) distributed during the pet food
recall of 2007, Stephens and Malone (2009) found that most people turn to blogs for emotional
support, as well as a way to virtually band together, share information, and demand remediation
for the crisis. Finally, one study (Liu, 2010) compared how blogs covered political crises differ-
ently than online newspapers. Applying framing theory, this study provided eight initial lessons
for crisis managers, including that blogs do not always scoop online newspapers and blogs more
negatively cover crises than online newspapers.

The second line of research (e.g., Perry, Taylor, & Doerfel, 2003; Taylor & Perry, 2005)
Involves the longitudinal tracking of how organizations integrate the Internet into their crisis
communication responses. For example, using the diffusion of innovations as their theoretical
framework, Taylor and Perry discovered that organizations less frequently use the Internet as part
of their crisis communication responses strategy and are more likely to turn to traditional
communication tactics such as press releases. Based on this analysis, Taylor and Kent (2007) devised a set of best practices for mediated crisis communication including using Web sites to tell your side of the crisis and creating different Web pages for different stakeholders. All of the recommendations, however, focus on the response phase, ignoring how organizations should integrate online communication into their issue scanning, crisis preparation, and recovery.

Thus, to address the lack of research-based guidelines available to effectively manage social media efforts before, during, and after a crisis, the study examines two sets of research questions to be explored in the context of the American Red Cross. The first set of research questions explores the proactive measures communicators can take:

RQ1: How does the American Red Cross perceive the importance of monitoring blogs as a crisis management function?
RQ2: What are the primary challenges the American Red Cross faces in monitoring blogs as a crisis management function?
RQ3: What are the most useful tools for monitoring blogs as a crisis management function according to the American Red Cross?

The second set of research questions, proposed at the end of the following section, addresses the second gap in the literature: The lack of a unifying theoretical framework to guide how crisis managers employ social media throughout the entire lifecycle of a crisis. Currently, the only found theoretical framework is the BMCC developed by Jin & Liu (2010), which will now be summarized.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The BMCC model (Jin & Liu, 2010, see Figure 1) helps crisis managers decide if and when to respond to influential bloggers through monitoring the blogosphere. The first part of the model

![Figure 1 Blog-Mediated Crisis Communication Model.](image)
explains how information is transmitted on and offline among key players: influential bloggers and their followers, mass media, and organizations’ online and offline communication. The first seven propositions predict how these various publics interact:

Proposition 1.1.a: Influential bloggers engage themselves in blogging about organizational crisis out of their issue involvement.

Proposition 1.1.b: Influential bloggers engage themselves in blogging about organizational crisis out of their self-involvement.

Proposition 1.2: Influential bloggers and their blogs exert more influence when the information authority and blogger credibility are both high.

Proposition 2.1: Influential blogs affect blog followers by providing issue-fit opinion leadership to address the followers’ motivation for informational and emotional needs of the crisis issue.

Proposition 2.2: Blogs created by influential bloggers affect media coverage by building/suggesting crisis issue agendas and providing alternative crisis information to journalists.

Proposition 3.1: Influential blogs exert influence indirectly on key publics’ issue awareness by providing the media with newsworthy content that is later edited and disseminated to general news audiences.

Proposition 3.2: Influential blogs exert influence indirectly on key publics’ issue awareness through offline word-of-mouth communication of issues among bloggers, blog followers, and other publics.

The second part of the model provides suggestions on how a given organization, facing the aforementioned interacting publics, should proactively manage blog-mediated crises through the whole crisis cycle from crisis monitoring to strategic responses, as reflected in the following two propositions:

Proposition 4.1: Crisis managers should engage in issue monitoring at every stage of the rumor generation process (generation, belief, and transmission) involving influential bloggers as influential blog content generators, blog followers, blog-resistant publics, and mass media outlets.

Proposition 4.2: Crisis managers should focus on crisis management strategies to circumvent rumor generation, belief, and transmission on and through influential blogs and to respond effectively to blog content by choosing appropriate message responses.

The study now more thoroughly discusses the organizational crisis management components of the model evaluated in this study: (a) monitoring blog-mediated rumors as relevant to an organization’s operations and/or reputation as featured in Proposition 4.1 and (b) strategies for responding to influential external blogs as featured in Proposition 4.2.

Monitoring Blog-Mediated Organizational Rumors

Jin & Liu (2010) argued that before crisis managers can strategically manage issues that may become blog-mediated crises, they must first identify which blogs are more influential in the eyes of the key publics. Identifying these blogs is critical because crisis managers must prioritize which blogs to monitor as they cannot examine every external blog. Therefore, based on rumor psychology and existing blog communication research (e.g., Lowrey, 2006; Sweester & Metzgar, 2007; Xenos,
2008; Yang & Lim, 2009), Jin & Liu (2010) proposed a matrix summarizing the factors that help predict which blogs are likely to become influential in any given crisis (see Table 1) given that there currently is not a consensus about the most effective method to evaluate blogs (Gillin, 2008a).

This matrix is divided into three common measurement types: outputs, outtakes, and outcomes (Paine, 2007). Outputs measure how many people are paying attention to organizations’ blogs (Gillin, 2008b; “State of blogosphere,” 2008; WebProNews, 2007). Of these output metrics, the number of posts or comments receives the most attention, but also is the most difficult to evaluate (Gillin, 2008a, 2008b; “State of blogosphere,” 2008). Only counting numbers for this category is meaningless unless organizations also evaluate the comments’ valence (positive, neutral, or negative) and the subject matter. Outtakes measure social capital and social networking including search engine authority and/or rank number of each blog. Finally, outcomes measure how blogs affect people’s behaviors and relationships, which is the most difficult to quantify. Thus, not surprisingly, outcomes are the least frequently mentioned metrics when discussing blog measurement despite the fact that this type of measurement is the most important (Lindenmann, 2003). Therefore, to evaluate the blog monitoring process outlined in the BMCC model the study asks:

RQ4: What is the current process, if any, the American Red Cross uses to monitor blogs as a crisis management function?

RQ5: What are the current evaluation criteria, if any, the American Red Cross uses for monitoring blogs?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measurement tools</th>
<th>Blog characteristics</th>
<th>Consistency w/key publics’ attitudes</th>
<th>Frequency of updates</th>
<th>Consistency w/organization’s crisis response</th>
<th>Dialogical self-portrayal</th>
<th>Interactivity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outputs</td>
<td>Number of posts about crisis by valence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of comments about crisis by valence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Number of unique visitors</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Number of RSS subscribers</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of crisis-related links to and from other sites</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outtakes</td>
<td>Search engine blog rank</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Third-party endorsements</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Business/media affiliation of the blogger</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>Key publics’ awareness of blog</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Key publics’ post-crisis trust of blog</td>
<td>X</td>
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</table>
Strategies for Responding to Influential External Blogs

Once crisis managers identify which influential external blogs to monitor routinely and during a crisis using the metrics just discussed, they must decide how, if at all, to respond to these blogs. Not all blogs merit direct responses, but Jin & Liu (2010) argued that influential external blogs must be monitored for issues that can become crises. Once these blogs and issues are identified, crisis managers can apply different response options depending upon the crisis generation phase. Grounded in rumor psychology theory and suggested rumor-quelling strategies (DiFonzo, 2008), Jin & Liu (2010) adapted the three-stage rumor transmission stage as the blog-mediated rumor cycle that communicators should manage at each level: (a) rumor generation, (b) rumor belief, and (c) rumor transition, which can be used by crisis managers to plan for effective crisis preparation and response in BMCC context. Jin & Liu (2010), however, noted that not all rumors go through the entire cycle as some rumors may never go beyond generation and others may never reach the recovery phase.

Existing crisis management literature (e.g., Coombs, 2007; Huang & Su, 2009; Liu, 2010; Taylor & Kent, 2007) can be well applied in BMCC practice. Primarily based on Coombs’ situational crisis communication theory (SCCT; Coombs, 2007), which proposes four response categories—deny, diminish, rebuild, and reinforce—(Coombs, 2007; Heath & Coombs, 2006), Jin & Liu (2010) proposed that crisis managers should primarily treat blog-mediated crises as rumors and combine rumor-management strategies with traditional crisis-response and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response options</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Rumor phases</th>
<th>Crisis recovery</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Base</td>
<td>Instructing information</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adapting information: Corrective action</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adapting information: Emotion</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deny</td>
<td>Attack the accuser</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scapegoat</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ignore</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diminish</td>
<td>Excuse</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Separation</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rebuild</td>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Apology</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transcendence</td>
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<td>Reinforce</td>
<td>Bolstering</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ingratiation</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Victimage</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Endorsement</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Punish*</td>
<td>Legal action</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. *Not a recommended blog-response strategy.
reputation repair strategies (see Table 2). Therefore, to explore the model’s proposed strategies for responding to influential external blogs, the study asks:

RQ6: What BMCC strategies, if any, does the American Red Cross use to respond to influential external blogs?

METHOD

Given the exploratory nature of the study, we selected qualitative research through in-depth interviews with 40 American Red Cross employees charged with delivering and/or managing social media communication. To recruit participants, we worked with National Headquarters’ social media manager, who sent a recruitment e-mail endorsing our study and requesting that chapters and headquarters’ employees volunteer to participate. We then followed up with e-mails and phone calls to schedule interviews with a diverse set of participants.

We sought a broad sample that represented all regions of the country, urban and rural areas, and large and small-sized chapters as well as representatives from National Headquarters. Also, we thought it was important to seek out participants who were early adopters of social media as well as those who were just beginning to use these tools in order to more comprehensively evaluate the BMCC model. The 40 participants’ titles included director of marketing communications, public relations specialist, director of development, public affairs volunteer, director of disaster services, president, CEO, and director of blood services. We stopped collecting data after a diverse sample and data saturation were obtained.

The interview guide included 14 broad questions with additional probes about (a) organizational demographics, (b) any challenges and opportunities associated with monitoring social media during routine and crisis times, (c) any social media monitoring practices before crises occur, (d) any social media response strategies employed during past crises, (e) any social media evaluation processes used during routine and crisis times, (f) any examples of specific crises in which the participants’ employed social media to manage the Red Cross’ reputation and/or support crisis survivors, and (g) any lessons learned. After pretesting the guide with two communicators at National Headquarters and one communicator in a midwestern chapter, all 40 interviews were conducted over the phone July 1 to July 21, 2009. On average, the interviews lasted 23 min (SD = 10.89).

All interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using Miles and Huberman’s (1994) data analysis procedures: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During data reduction, we coded the interview transcripts using the computer programs Atlas.ti and Excel. First, using Atlas.ti, we looked for comments that answered our primary research questions and assigned this data the relevant research question number. During this stage, we also looked for data that did not fit into the research questions (i.e., outliers) and developed new codes for this data. During data display, we collapsed the codes into categories through merging codes in Atlas.ti and then exporting the data to Excel spreadsheets, called checklist matrixes. These matrixes summarized the data related to each code or theme that emerged from data reduction. Finally, during conclusion drawing/verification, we reviewed our matrixes to identify the multiple meanings that emerged from the data, noting commonalities, as well as discrepancies in interpreting each theme.
FINDINGS

Importance of Monitoring the Blogosphere

Answering research question one, the majority of the participants ($n = 30$) emphasized the importance of proactively monitoring social media despite that they only spend on average 35 min a day doing so ($SD = 28.38$). Twenty-two of these participants stated monitoring social media is critical during routine times as well as during crises because they are low-cost tools to (a) generate and maintain volunteers and donors, (b) attract and maintain media attention, and (c) educate the general public about Red Cross services. For example, a participant from a midwestern chapter said, “I think during a noncrisis time it’s a good way to generate new volunteers, get your point of view out, and be relevant to things that are relevant to social media. During crisis, I think it is a gift from the IT Gods.”

The other eight communicators stated monitoring social media during routine times is moderately important, but during a crisis it becomes paramount. For example, a participant from a different midwestern chapter said, “Our social media efforts fit into the overall Red Cross strategy of striking while the iron is hot. During disasters, during crisis, that’s when we get huge amounts of press attention.” The remaining seven participants stated that monitoring social media is not important at all because their key publics do not engage in social media during routine or crisis times. For example, one participant from a northeastern chapter said, “Here in my state, things like social media or any kind of online content, is a little bit rarer. So, it has not been that important to me.”

One especially noteworthy trend that emerged was the usefulness of monitoring and engaging with the microblogging site Twitter to foster media relations, mentioned by 14 of the participants. For example, a participant from a western chapter said: “Some media follow our Twitter stream, and someone had a story idea from there. They saw how many fires I was posting. Gee, are there that many fires? Let me look, last year we had half as many fires. We got a story out of that.”

Primary Challenges Faced by the American Red Cross

Despite the recognition that proactively monitoring social media is important, the participants pointed to three primary obstacles they face, answering research question two: (a) time and human resources, (b) learning curve and/or reticence of volunteers and management to use social media tools, and (c) the scope of the blogosphere. By far, the most frequently mentioned obstacle was time and human resources, mentioned by 18 participants from all regions of the country and various chapter sizes. For example, a participant from a northeastern chapter said, “Time and not enough staff to cover it. Too many other daily responsibilities to be monitoring stuff like that.”

Ironically, during a crisis when monitoring social media is especially important, six participants noted that they would have even less time for monitoring because they are too busy responding to media and public inquires about the crisis. To address these time and human resource constraints, 12 of the participants discussed hiring interns or enlisting volunteers to manage and implement social media programs. For example, a participant from a midwestern chapter said, “We made an effort to do it [social media], but it’s mostly because a couple of volunteers have taken it upon themselves to do it.” Although having interns and volunteers manage and implement social
media campaigns has its limitations (e.g., potential for high turnover leading to inconsistent social media monitoring approaches), participants also noted that it can be a way to sustain volunteer and intern engagement over time.

Fourteen participants from all regions of the country and various chapter sizes highlighted difficulties associated with convincing the board and/or volunteers that monitoring social media is important. For example, a participant from a northeastern chapter said, “It took us over a year to get the board’s approval on this. I think a lot of our board members—age is an issue, they don’t understand why we would use it, they don’t see the value in it.” Nine participants, mostly from smaller chapters, mentioned that it is challenging to keep up with the scope of social media and learning new tools that emerge.

Most Useful Tools

Although two participants stated that all social media tools are useful, the vast majority of the participants, 25, stated that the microblogging site Twitter is the most useful social media tool. Further answering research question three, participants noted that Twitter is easy to monitor and use and, importantly, can be updated using cell phones anywhere. For example, a participant from a southern chapter noted: “And especially in disasters Twitter is useful because it’s an instantaneous way to say if we needed to shelter people in the area after a huge storm or whatever it is.”

Coming in a distant second place, six participants lauded the social networking site Facebook also because it is easy to monitor, use, and update and, unique from Twitter, has a broad user base. Four of these participants also noted that Twitter and Facebook can be linked together making it even easier to update the two simultaneously. Only three participants stated that the video sharing site YouTube is most useful during routine and crisis times and only one participant mentioned the photo sharing site Flickr. Most interesting, only five participants recognized traditional blogs as the most useful social media tools to proactively manage crises. A participant from a southern chapter explained this finding by stating:

I haven’t found blogs to be really as relevant as some folks think they should be. They’re very biased and almost rumor mongering, for lack of a better term. Usually what I get out of Twitter is very, this is occurring right now and then you can seek additional information. So for us that’s more important than the blogs.

Current Processes Used to Monitor Blogs

Answering research question four, the minority (10) of the participants do not have a formal process for monitoring blogs/microblogs. Five of these participants work for chapters with five or fewer full-time employees, but the other half work for chapters with 15 or more full-time employees. The same 25 participants who lauded Twitter as the most useful social media tool, also heavily rely on this microblogging site to monitor daily mentions of their chapters. Eleven of these participants also rely on Google Alerts to e-mail them daily blog postings and media hits for key word searches such as their chapters’ names. For example, a participant from one western chapter with two full-time employees managing social media efforts in addition to other responsibilities stated: “The chapters basically have very little money for actual paid media monitoring.
So the way we monitor is by receiving Google Alerts on things that we think are important. Of course we are also monitoring on Twitter anyone that uses our name.''} The remaining five participants primarily rely on National Headquarters’ Daily Social Media Update to monitor social media. This update summarizes key trending topics for the American Red Cross and includes blog and microblog posts, YouTube videos, and Flickr pictures.

Evaluation Criteria for Monitoring the Blogosphere

Because all the participants who have a formal process for daily monitoring the blogosphere rely primarily on third-party applications (i.e., Google Alerts and Twitter) and National Headquarters’ Daily Social Media Update, their evaluation criteria for monitoring the blogosphere are rudimentary. Further answering research question five, the participants essentially look for mentions of their chapter or trending topics about the American Red Cross as a whole, as mentioned before. However, when specifically asked about what characteristics add more credibility to a blog or microblog post about their chapter or the Red Cross as a whole, four primary characteristics emerged: content, blogger’s/microblogger’s affiliation, publics’ awareness of the blog/microblog, and publics’ trust of the blog/microblog. By far the most important characteristic was content, especially local/regional content and content developed by other American Red Cross chapters, recognized by 29 of the participants. For example, a participant from a mid-western chapter said, “The strategy is to keep it minimalistic. We keep it local and we look at the trendsetters. I wonder where these chapters get all these great ideas. I can’t do them all, but replicate what I can.”

Fifteen participants also mentioned the bloggers’/microbloggers’ affiliation, emphasizing media affiliation as well as volunteers and donors. For example, a participant from National Headquarters said, “I start with media outlets, and then trickle down after that. I think they’re easier to find and more credible, but it’s also important to pay attention to those who are already invested in the Red Cross.” Fourteen participants mentioned publics’ awareness and publics’ trust as important. For example, a participant representing a southern region said, “That’s a big deal. Because if they have influence we want to keep a watch on them.” Finally, other characteristics the participants discussed were: number of subscribers to the blog/microblog (recognized by 10 participants); number of posts (recognized by seven participants); number of RSS subscribers (recognized by seven participants); number of links (recognized by five participants); blog/microblog rank (recognized by five participants); and number of unique visitors (recognized by one participant).

Not surprisingly given time and personnel constraints, only six participants have a formal analysis process for evaluating relevant content found on the blogosphere. These six participants evaluate numbers such as their follower base on Twitter or friend list on Facebook as well as trends in relevant topics found on blogs and microblogs over time. In addition, these participants capture stories to illustrate the importance of monitoring the blogosphere to sustain management support for social media efforts and convince more employees and volunteers to contribute to their social media efforts. For example, a participant from a western chapter said:

So I have the numbers of people who clicked on the Twitter links, the number of increased traffic to our Web site, the number of comments we’re getting, those sorts of really hard data numbers. And
also some of those kind of like life stories things that have come out of having a social media program. Such as having additional volunteers showing up to trainings because they heard of it on Twitter or on Facebook.

The other 34 participants listed three reasons for not formally analyzing the blogosphere content they track: no knowledge base for how to evaluate the blogosphere (mentioned by 25 participants); social media programs too new for evaluation (mentioned by five participants); and preference for organic evaluation rather than formal metrics (mentioned by four participants).

**BMCC Responses Currently Used**

To understand the strategies participants use to respond to influential external blogs (research question six), the study first asked participants if they have an overall BMCC response strategy. The study then asked participants to provide a specific example of a crisis in which they employed BMCC in their preparation, response, and/or recovery. Twenty-nine participants stated their overall response strategy is to respond to as many posts as possible, though 14 of these participants recognized that they are more likely to respond to negative posts rather than positive ones. For example, a participant from a western chapter said, “If we are able to respond to those sorts of things, people see that we do care about those people who may have had a negative experience because even though we are a nonprofit organization, it is all about customer service.” In addition, as previously noted, six participants said that during a crisis they would have less time to respond immediately and three participants said they always wait to respond because they do not want to escalate negative situations.

Eleven participants provided specific examples of how they have used BMCC to manage a weather-related crisis (e.g., severe flooding, blizzard, and a tornado). Another nine participants provided specific examples of how they used BMCC to manage non-weather-related issues that could become crises or had become crises (e.g., complaints about Red Cross services, complaints about Red Cross special events, and dissatisfaction with volunteer experiences). In all the examples, participants used instructing information (e.g., explaining the situation) and/or adapting information in the form of corrective action (e.g., making a change). For example, a representative from National Headquarters provided an example of a common issue for his department that he resolved through providing instructing and adapting information:

For instance, someone’s daughter was taking a Red Cross swimming lesson at the local pool, and the mother had a complaint about the instructor and posted it on her blog. When that came to our attention we were able to address the situation with the local chapter and the swimming pool. And then we also provided a response to the mother. And she was overjoyed, she couldn’t believe she was getting a response from the Red Cross on this. It’s good to get the general public’s perspective on things.

In addition, participants issued apologies when relevant and provided compensation (e.g., reimbursement for classes or a special event) if needed. In one example, a participant also used ignoring when it was clear that further engagement would not resolve the issue.
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that the study’s participants recognize the importance of proactively monitoring social media before, during, and after crises occur. In particular, 30 of the participants discussed how the low-cost of social media coupled with their ability to generate and maintain volunteers and donors, as well as attract media attention makes them a natural fit for nonprofits during crisis and routine times. Given that 22% of US nonprofits’ total revenue comes from gifts and grants, using social media to maintain relationships with donors can significantly impact nonprofits’ ability to deliver services before, during, and after crises (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2007).

Further, social media can build relationships with volunteers and the media, making them champions of nonprofits’ causes and providing both physical and reputation support during crises. Currently, approximately 26% of Americans over the age of 16 volunteer, and organizations like the American Red Cross rely on volunteers for daily operations (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2008). Nationwide the Red Cross has 1.33 million volunteers and only 29,850 paid staff (“Frequently Asked Questions,” 2009). Also, the majority of nonprofits struggle with obtaining traditional media coverage (Bronstein, 2006), but our findings indicate that using social media can lead to more traditional media coverage. Given these findings about the importance of social media as an issues and crisis management tool, the study will now discuss how the findings led to revising the BMCC model’s influence matrix, recommended response strategies as well as a redesign of the model itself.

Influence Matrix and Response Strategies

The interviews confirmed that American Red Cross chapters and National Headquarters as a whole have a system, though rather rudimentary, to identify influential social media. As stated in the BMCC model’s proposition 4.1, crisis managers should engage in issue monitoring at every stage of the rumor generation process involving blog followers, blog-resistant publics and mass media outlets (Jin & Liu, 2010). In addition, this study confirmed the usefulness of evaluation measures previously identified by social media researchers and summarized in the BMCC model’s blog influence matrix (see Table 1). The number of subscribers, posts, RSS subscribers, and links are used by the American Red Cross as important quantifiable indicators for deciding whether a particular social media outlet is important or not in addition to the primary concern of content and issue relevance. However, to better reflect the study’s findings that the American Red Cross relies more heavily on Facebook and Twitter and to a lesser extent on YouTube rather than blogs, we suggest renaming the matrix the Social Media Influence Matrix to apply beyond blogs.

Also, many of the American Red Cross chapters and National Headquarters departments are involved in direct interaction with social media content creators and practice preliminary precrisis strategic intervention. Most of these responses are based on sending corrective information via the social media platform in which the issue emerged in order to address the issue with source credibility and information authority. This demonstrates that the full-range of social-mediated crisis-response strategies as proposed by the BMCC model are not being implemented (see Table 2).

Interestingly, despite time and personnel constraints, the vast majority of the participants stated their overall strategy for responding to social media as a crisis management function was to respond to as many posts as possible. This current dominant strategy is not only unrealistic given
the identified constraints, but also does not provide a method for distinguishing between innocuous posts and those that could lead to new crises and/or worsen existing crises. Though providing instructing and adapting information in response to crises that emerge via social media are appropriate initial responses, more nuanced responses may be needed.

This finding in particular highlights a need for more crisis preparation so as to allocate limited crisis resources strategically. Heath (2004) indicated that organizations are likely to suffer less damage from crises when they are better prepared resource wise and strategically. As Jin (2010) found, although large nonprofit organizations tend to be more familiar with managing external long-term crises, they are not necessarily more proficient in dealing with internal or operational threats. Challenges a large nonprofit organization faces include the increasing demand of financial and human resources to support their daily operations. In addition, local chapters of a large nonprofit are likely to be located in geographically remote areas from each other with varying communication infrastructures and different levels of technology adoption. Thus, for communicators working for large nonprofit organizations like the American Red Cross it is especially critical to balance the situational and resource-based concerns.

Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model

As previously mentioned, the interview participants particularly lauded the value of Twitter and Facebook. Blogs generally were not viewed as useful for crisis communication as compared to other social media. These findings are supported by survey research indicating that publics increasingly use social networking sites such as Facebook instead of blogs (EDUCAUSE, 2008; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010) and the growth of Twitter as an effective crisis management tactic (Sutter, 2009). Therefore, as a first step in revising the BMCC model based on empirical research we suggest renaming the model the social-mediated crisis communication model (SMCC).

This model renaming also leads to renaming the publics featured in the model, which better supports labels currently used in social media literature: (a) Influential bloggers are now influential social media creators; (b) blog followers are now social media followers; and (c) nonblog followers are now social media inactives (e.g., Bernoff, 2010; Li & Bernoff, 2008; Li, Bernoff, Fiorentino, & Glass, 2007). In addition, the two types of media content featured in the model—social and traditional media—are now separated to reflect the different relationships American Red Cross chapters reported with the two media content types in terms of crisis communication.

Further, to better depict the ubiquity of on and offline opinions shared among key publics, the revised model now more clearly indicates how offline word-of-mouth communication occurs among the organization (the Red Cross in this case), influential social media creators, social media followers, and social media inactives. A grey box (rather than the multiple arrows used in the original model) now indicates who participates in this offline word-of-mouth communication.

Also, to reflect factors that affect how organizations respond to crises via traditional media, social media, and offline word-of-mouth communication, the model now includes five considerations that emerged from the interviews: crisis origin, crisis type, infrastructure, message strategy, and message form. These factors are listed under the organization in the center of the redesigned model.

First, the crisis origin—whether the crisis sparked from an internal organizational issue (e.g., mismanaging volunteers) or from an issue external of the organization (e.g., a severe weather incident occurs that the American Red Cross responds to). Second, the crisis type—victim,
accident, or intentional—impacts how organizations should respond to blog-mediated crises (Coombs, 2007). The study asked participants to discuss their crisis management procedures for all crisis types and origins. As previously stated, in all the examples, participants used instructing information (e.g., explaining the situation) and/or adapting information in the form of corrective action (e.g., making a change). Thus, it seems that proactive and accommodative crisis-response strategies are currently adopted by the Red Cross public relations practitioners. As previous research argued, organizations should adapt their crisis-response strategies based on the crisis type (e.g., Coombs, 2007). This study adds that the crisis origin also should be included for (a) organizations that have a mission to respond to external crises (e.g., American Red Cross and the Citizen Corps) and (b) organizations that assist publics when responding to external crises (e.g., a hotel providing free shelter for crisis survivors).

Third, the organizational infrastructure (centralized vs. localized), and more specifically, to what level should the organizational headquarters respond to a crisis. Depending on the crisis situation and the social media context, some crises might be best handled according to a central message designed to be communicated by all local affiliates, branches, or chapters, as well as organizational headquarters, although in some crisis situations it might be more effective for the local level to strategically respond to local publics generated by influential blogs. Fourth and fifth the crisis message’s strategy and form and, more specifically, how to integrate the information supply with emotional support. In current practice, the American Red Cross tends to respond to negative comments solely by providing corrected information. How to diversify SMCC responses and strategically manage emotion-laden crisis/conflict mediated by social media, traditional media, and word-of-mouth communication would be an important agenda for crisis scholars to further explore.

Finally, to better depict how crisis information is distributed by social media directly and indirectly, the revised model has two arrow types: solid arrows for direct relationships and dotted arrows for indirect relationships. For example, the model explains that there is a direct relationship between crisis information disseminated by traditional media and social media inactives, reflecting the important role traditional media play in educating publics about crises (Jin & Liu, 2010). There is an indirect relationship between influential social media creators and social media inactives as the inactives may receive information from the social media creators via friends who read the social media, but not directly from the original source (Jin & Liu, 2010).

All of these revisions lead to a more simplified model, which should be more useful for practitioners engaged in issue and crisis management (see Figure 2). Despite this recognized importance of using social media, for the American Red Cross communicators obstacles such as time and human resource limitations, managements’ and volunteers’ learning curve and/or reticence to embrace social media, and the scope of the blogosphere constrained their abilities to fully take advantage of social media. In addition, participants favored using social media tools that were easy to learn and use from any location such as Facebook and Twitter. Therefore, the simplified model better reflects these constraints.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the study provides both significant practical and theoretical applications, it is important to put these findings in context by highlighting the study’s limitations. First, as the first empirical evaluation of the BMCC model, this study only evaluated the organizational crisis management
components of the model. Thus, future research needs to further examine these remaining components of the model, especially the motivation of communicative behaviors of influential bloggers and how crisis information source and form might impact how blog followers and journalists perceive the crisis situation. Second, by focusing on one organization the study’s findings are limited to this single organization. Furthermore, the organization selected has proactively emphasized and resourced social media efforts, which may make the findings more relevant to other organizations that also have prioritized social media efforts. Thus, future research could replicate this study in organizations that similarly prioritize social media as well as those that do not. In addition, the American Red Cross most frequently responds to severe weather incidents and fires than other crisis types, potentially limiting the findings. Therefore, future research should replicate this study with organizations that respond most frequently to other crisis types (e.g., product recalls and terrorism).

Although the hot social media tools of the day will constantly change, the obstacles associated with managing and implementing these tools as a crisis management function largely will remain the same. Therefore, the revised SMCC model provides a theoretically-grounded framework for using blogs/microblogs (as well as potentially other social media tools) to manage communication before, during, and after crises occur. This model can help guide organizations in effectively preparing for a social-mediated crisis through outlining an effective issues monitoring process. It can also serve as an assessment tool during a crisis by outlining potential response strategies for communicating with influential bloggers and followers. Finally, it can serve an imperative during crisis recovery by providing concrete metrics for tracking how the crisis is resolved in the blogosphere and how the organizational response is received by key publics.

REFERENCES


