

Building Online Communities After Crises: Two Case Studies

Melissa L. Janoske, Doctoral Candidate
University of Maryland
melissa.janoske@gmail.com

Background: This study examined how individuals impacted by a crisis use social media to build and maintain online communities of practice after a crisis. An online community of practice, a more specific form of an online community, requires individuals to have something in common (domain), to share a desire to learn and work within that common item (practice), and to be around others who are interested in sharing the common item or experience (community) (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009). The internet has the ability to bridge and expand social networks, which aid with information exchange (Kavanaugh, Reese, Carroll, & Rosson, 2005). This information exchange is viewed as a clear function of a thriving community (Wright, 2002), but is not the only relevant one. Complexity theory looks at a combination of factors to offer an understanding of the self-organization process, or the patterns an individual may use to seek and find an online community (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008). Online, the community functions of social media are able to help with these information needs, but very few studies have looked at how that might happen or the actual help online communities provide during crisis response and recovery (e.g., Macias, Hilyard, & Freimuth, 2009; Procopio & Procopio, 2007).

RQ1: Why do online communities of practice form after a crisis?

RQ2: How, if at all, is an online community's crisis recovery impacted by communication within online communities of practice?

Method: Qualitative case study, including content analysis of 522 Facebook posts and 687 tweets, and ten interviews.

Case #1: Jersey Shore Hurricane News, a Facebook page about Hurricane Sandy (Oct. 2012) with over 220,000 Likes and 11,000 interactions; "news for the people, by the people;" content from the week of, one week at six months after, and one week at one year after the storm

Case #2: #batman and #shooting on Twitter, a conversation about the shooting at the premiere of The Dark Knight Rises in CO (July 2012); content from the full six months after the shooting

Key Conclusions:

Theoretical

1. Adding the community of practice model to crisis communication understanding, and expanding it to include both continuation (communities that don't end) and conversational communities (those focused on information and not relationships)
2. Moving from a one-to-many communication model and organizational focus of crisis communication to a one-to-one model and consequent focus on affected individuals

Practical

3. The importance of location as community builder and identifier, adapting information needs/availability to the community and to the crisis, and accepting multiple relationship types (including stewards) in order to build community.
4. Communities of practice should be built prior to the crisis. Specific social media platforms offer unique opportunities for success based on the type of community desired (Twitter as conversational community, Facebook as community of practice).

main part of crisis plan date site

all have access to info

wide variety interests in connect

from U.K.

Food, water, shelter, place to plug in my phone

freeze water in your freezer