

Crisis communication and social media in the context of agenda setting theory

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Abstract

Crisis communication is important for managing critical situations. In the times when social media platforms are experiencing a growth spurt and complementing traditional mediums of communication, it becomes very important to know how such information sharing can impact crisis communication. In the context of agenda setting theory, this study examines this study analyses the important scenarios and investigates how the use of social media platform through focused and selective sharing of information impact crisis communication.

Key words: Crisis Communication, Agenda Setting theory, Social Media

Introduction

Crises communication is communication used by organizations before, during and after crises¹. Such communication becomes very critical in the fields of media and journalism as it can directly impact the perception life situations of people at large. In the fast paced digitally transforming world, the field of media also has not remained untouched by this digital revolution. Traditional media is largely being complemented by social media . Social media can be defined as the group of internet based applications enabling the creation and exchange of user generated content². Social media platforms enable an economical and efficient way of communication and hence have become an important part of people's life. It has changed the ways of establishing relations, transferring information and doing business².

Agenda Setting theory

An agenda is a selection of items arranged to give some items more importance than others. According to agenda theory the news media present the public net with a picture of the world as it is but with an agenda of their own, that is, a selection of reports about what is happening in the world³. As per agenda theorist, such selective presentation of issues can influence the relative importance of existing challenges, in the thinking of people. Various research studies have observed that the personal agendas of the reader are set in this manner³. Such selective reporting

can have a snowballing effect in the age of social media where involvement and accessibility of people at large is far higher with much less restrictions or validations of the information presented.

Thus it becomes imperative to examine how communication in the times of crisis can get impacted in this age of flourishing social media. Hence, in the context of agenda setting theory, this study examines how the sharing of selective information can impact managing communication during crisis. The study examines the important cases and incidents in India. India besides being a fast growing largest democracy of world has been experiencing a spurt in growth in the social media platforms. The Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), it is estimates that by the end of March 2019, India has over 451 million Internet users and it stands second only to China in terms of monthly active internet users⁴.

The rest of the study is structured as follows. The next section discusses important cases followed by discussions, recommendations, conclusion and references. Hence this study considers the following important and recent cases, and investigates how the use of social media platform through focused and selective sharing of information impact crisis communication.

The Ayodhya case verdict

Ahead of the verdict on Ayodhya case, the government of Uttar Pradesh had issued a directive strictly disallowing people in Ayodhya to make any defamatory remarks on deities on social media platforms such as WatsApp, Twitter and instagram for a period of two months⁵. It was estimated that Faizabad police had deployed around 16000 volunteers for keeping a tab on any controversial content on various social media platforms⁶. Various WatsApp group had gone into “admin only” mode ahead of the verdict⁷. This goes to highlight the significance of social media and crisis communication being done by authorities to avoid any selective sharing inappropriate content escalating an inflammable situation.

Bhima Koregaon riots

On January 1st, 2018, there were violent clashes broke during the celebration to mark the 201st anniversary of Bhima-Koregaon battle in Pune district of Maharashtra⁸. Authorities had to grapple with managing information on the social platforms for suppressing the crisis. The aftereffect of the case was also felt when during the anniversary of the Bhima-Koregaon case where it was feared that the campaign of hate can resurface on the social media.

Superintendent of Police Sandip Patil said, “Our social media cell is identifying the social media accounts and their origins. The officials are also notifying the respective police stations and headquarters to track down such anti-social elements.... To counter such rumor mongering and inciting content, we, as part of community policing, are uploading brief videos of local people, including sarpanchs and some influential villagers, in which they are appealing the visitors to come on January 1 without any fear. They are ensuring that all the necessary arrangements are being done.”⁸

The social media was not only used to identify the culprits but also to proactively pacify the situation by circulating peace videos and messages. “The police officials said that they have come across several online posts which are full of inciteful messages, using provocative language against various communities. To prevent any untoward incident, the police department and the district administration is taking all precautions possible. To counter hateful posts on social media, ahead of the Bhima Koregaon anniversary, the cyber cell of the Maharashtra police have made videos where villagers are speaking about peace. The senior officials in the police department said that they are now using social media to spread these brief videos”⁹. Almost 25000 provocative post were deleted by Maharashtra police department so as to avoid any untoward event¹².

Article 370 and the Citizen Amendment Act

Article 370 and the Citizen Amendment Act were among the recent issues which created lot of discussion on social media. The problem in such scenarios can get compounded when it becomes challenging to differentiate between the genuine news and the fake ones. It gets further complicated when coupled with the personal biases of the readers such selective forwarding of news items can further become rampant.” The town squares of Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp were buzzing this year with people debating issues like Citizenship Amendment Act and scrapping of Article 370 with memes going viral, even as these companies battled the menace of fake news, data breaches and attempts by the government to frame rules to make social media platforms more accountable”¹⁰

Social media and the elections

Social media has started playing a critical role in Indian elections. Social media platforms if not managed properly can aggravate the challenges resulting in situations requiring crisis management. The importance of social media can be gauged from a news article of a national daily where it is commented, ““Today marks the first day of the world’s biggest Social Media Election. More than a decade of innovation, investment and imagination by the world’s biggest technology companies will converge with 142 million voters across 20 states and union territories in the first phase of Elections 2019. Over the next five weeks, outside the hot and dusty campaign rallies, much of the war will be fought on WatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok and Instagram...Internet users in India were estimated at 566 million in December 2018, a recent survey said. Rural users comprise 250 million, which was the national total at the time of the 2014 election. The news also highlighted the role of election commission, “To give it due credit, the Election Commission issued social media guidelines way back in 2013, and has again spelled out rules and cautions for the mega-election starting today.“Various Social Media platforms shall also remain under the close and stringent vigil of the Commission for any content aimed at vitiating the electoral process or designed to disturb peace, tranquility, social harmony and public order.”¹¹

Discussions

Thus it can be seen the relevance of agenda setting theory can be effectively observed in crisis communication in the present times when social media platforms are experiencing a growth spurt. Thus based on the discussions, following key finding can be inferred about the relevance of agenda specific sharing of news on social media platforms in crisis communication:

Use of social media for managing crisis communication

It is now becoming apparent how authorities are taking social media platform seriously and don't hesitate to break down on such platforms and participants for suppressing anti-social activities influencing the people at large. The steps taken during Koregaon Bhima incident was one such example.

Using social media in crisis communication for restoring law and order

While suppressing crisis, it was also observed that authorities also make an effective use of videos, and peace messages appealing people for maintaining peace and order. The same was observed during the incidents such as Bhima Koregaon riots and before the Ayodhya verdict. Hence besides a medium for suppression crisis, the social media can also be used for communication peace messages and establishing law and order.

Use of social media as a precautionary move for avoiding crisis

The preparations ahead of Ayodhya verdict was one such scenario where authorities took preemptive vigilant steps for avoiding any were unforeseen repercussions. Many WatApp group also went into "Admin only" mode during the same period.

Impacting safety and security of the nation

Such vigilance shown by authorities for managing crisis communication on social media platforms can not only help in averting crisis but can also help in detecting the anti-social elements which could be using such platforms for selective sharing controversial information largely impacting the progress of nation.

cont.

Considering the analysis of literature and the cases, figure 1 depicts the critical association of crisis communication, social media platforms and agenda setting theory among them.

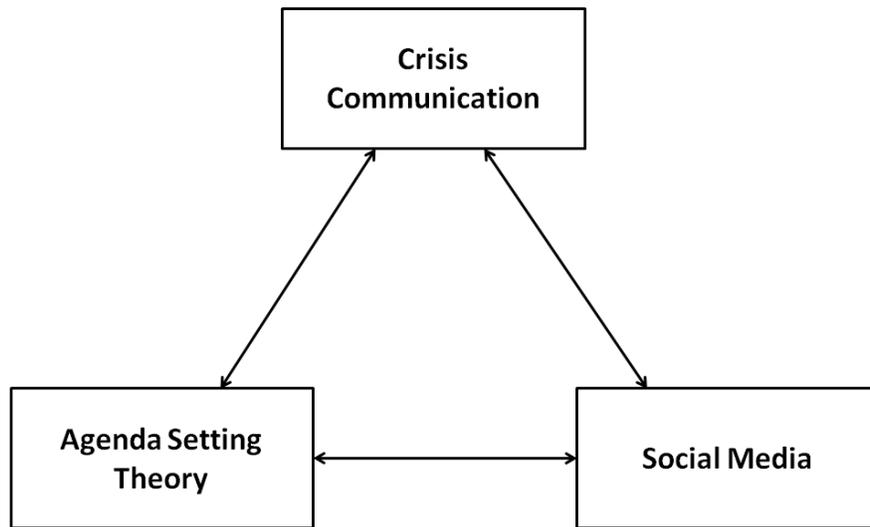


Fig. 1

Recommendations

Based on the above mentioned literature, discussion and key findings, the study presents the following recommendations:

Establishing detailed rules and regulations for the selection and sharing of news on social platforms

It appears imperative that detailed specific rules and regulations should be laid out so as to avoid any improper and inappropriate use of social media by selective posting and forwarding of information

Involvement of people at large

Unlike the traditional media, people at large are involved in generation and forwarding of news and information. Hence for involvement of people is important for managing crisis communication on social media

Building awareness about communication during crisis

Rather than waiting for a scenario like Ayodhya verdict or elections, many proactive steps can be taken to build awareness among users about the selection and sharing of appropriate information

on social media platforms so as to improve the digital maturity and wisdom among masses and to avoid any scenarios requiring crisis communication.

Integration with the traditional media for crisis communication

In the present period of transition, steps should be taken to further integrate social media with the traditional mediums so as to help in restricting crisis happening due to incidents such as fake information getting circulated on social media platforms.

Developing effective ways of differentiating original from fake on social media platforms

In the times when access and sharing of information is so easily possible, it is important that more effective tools are developed which can help the masses in knowing the correctness of the information shared. Such steps can help in avoiding situations requiring crisis communication.

Conclusion

Hence it can be observed that agenda theory does present a meaningful context for crisis communication in this era of social media emerging as a strong medium of communication. Hence it is imperative for both the governing bodies and the governed to be aware of effects such intentional or unintentional selecting of information while sharing the same on various social media platforms, and take the required steps.

Future research

This study investigated the issue of crisis communication using the important events which took place in the recent past. It attempted to effectively establish the relevance of crisis communication and social media in the context of agenda theory. With the increasing importance of social media platforms, in future this research study can be further developed by studying these challenges across different geographies or across the countries experiencing stages of development. Thus the future research can consider doing a comparative study among Asian nations, or among the developing and developed nations.

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