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ONLINE AUTHORITY COMMUNICATION DURING AN EPIDEMIC

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Abstract

Social media is creating new challenges for authority communications during crises, such as a pandemic. This study examined Finnish citizens' opinions about authorities as crisis managers during the swine flu epidemic of 2009-2010 and examined the success of authority intervention to online discussion forums. Through a content analysis carried out at the discussion forums, the study showed that though authorities are highly trusted in general in Finland, this trust is not extended to the online environment. Online, civilians did not trust authorities and the protective actions taken. Moreover, the authorities' intervention to the discussion forums aimed at correcting false information and shaping opinions seemed to fail, as the intervention was carried out too late and with too little resources. The paper calls for more proactive authority communication that would establish a dialogue with citizens before a crisis to ensure credibility during difficult times.

1 Introduction

Previous research has established that communication and public relations play a crucial role in managing risks and crises (Coombs, 1999; Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Reynolds, 2006; Rowan, 1991). Lack of common language and proper dialogue between authorities and citizens has been defined to be one of the biggest obstacles for successful risk and crisis communication (Renn 2008; Af Wählberg & Sjöberg, 2000). Research shows that experts speak with technical and scientific terms, whereas citizens perceive risks and crisis more emotionally (Kasperson et al, 2003). Perception is crucial, as risks become real once they are perceived as real (Beck 1992).

Social media has been suggested to provide an opportunity for real-time dialogue, building trust and motivating action (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), all of which fit well in with the objectives of risk communication (Rowan, 1991). Public relations professionals are increasingly using online tools (Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008), yet public sector organisations are often slow to follow the trends. In line with the recent Stockholm Accords (2010) guiding communication professionals, the paper calls for the need of authorities to establish a real dialogue to ensure that citizen' and stakeholders' information needs and expectations are met.

1.1 Method

The study was interested in citizens' attitudes towards authority communication online during a pandemic. As data, two popular Finnish online discussion forums during the swine flu epidemic of 2009-2010 were analyzed. For several months, the authorities in charge of the crises were absent from the discussion online around swine flu, and false information and speculation reigned. The discussion online was so vivid that even the traditional media reported on it. In December 2009, the authority in charge, the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (STM) saw a need to intervene in the wild citizen discussion.

The aim of the authority intervention was to provide correct information and give advice to citizens about the disease, vaccination and development of the epidemic. The discussion forums chosen for the intervention were the forums of *Iltalehti* (Eveningpaper, the biggest Finnish tabloid) and *KaksPlus* (TwoPlus, a family magazine with prenatal and parenthood approach). The comments posted by the authorities made up 0,4 % of the swine flu discussions within the two chosen forums, and the authorities used one pseudonym "STM-influenssainfo" (STM influenza info) making the comments identifiable. The study was conducted in the Spring of 2010 and narrowed down to those 19 discussions consisting of 2264 comments where

authorities were involved. (Total number of discussions on the topic of swine flu was much greater, over 2000 discussions).

1.2 Findings

Three different attitudes were apparent in the discussion forums: positive, neutral and negative. Comments in Iltalehti were generally more negative toward the authorities than at Kaksplus, but as there were no other differences between the two forums, the data was combined. Most of the discussions on the forums comprised of argumentation between the Negatives and Positives, without a clear outcome into either direction. The biggest group were the Neutrals (38 %), those who did not disclose or express a strong attitude toward authorities or the vaccinations organized by the authorities. The Neutrals were mostly asking questions, providing information or commenting on others' ideas.

The Negatives (22,7 %) were sceptical toward not only authorities but also medical companies, and questioned the effectiveness and safety of the vaccination. They did not trust authorities' ability to manage the epidemic and blamed medical companies of causing the disease on purpose, and making money with people's health. The Positives (19,8 %) on the other hand, justified the vaccination campaign and showed approval for the authority actions, mostly based on their own positive experiences, as well as scientific studies and statements.

The intervention was started in December 2009, when the epidemic had already been active for 7 months. The role of the authority was minor, provided on the ministry's website and news releases. The language of the authorities was more official than the language generally spoken on the forums. Overall the ministry's role was a reactive one, as they did not initiate any new discussions. In four of the 19 discussions, the discussion ended with the authority comment, making their effect impossible to evaluate. In some cases the citizens targeted direct questions to

the authorities but received no or insufficient answers. In total, 58 % of comments posted right after authority comments were negative.

1.3 Analysis & conclusion

The lack of authorities' early input gave free space for hostile and distorted comments. As the authorities were missing from the discussion forums for several months, when they finally joined in no real dialogue was established. The citizens' surprisingly negative reactions toward the authority intervention online could result from their late arrival, or the possibility that the authorities were considered outsiders at the forum. Many of the negative reactions may also have been self-induced, as the authorities failed to answer many questions posed directly at them. The authorities either underestimated the resources needed for effective online intervention or they were unable to locate in time the central issue arenas (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2009) where discussions on the topic were going on. One outcome of the failed authority communications and proof of the overall negative attitude toward vaccinations was that only about half of Finns chose to be vaccinated; clearly fewer than in the 1980s Polio vaccinations, where the whole population was vaccinated.

Affecting people's attitudes and enabling behavioural change is especially challenging online, where people use pseudonyms or interact in total anonymity. Social media has increased the ability of stakeholders to talk back (Brown, 2009). Authorities have to be proactive, build trusting relations with stakeholders before the crisis, not during it. Serving citizens will increasingly include being present online, especially in crisis situations, when the need for information and communication is heightened.

When making an intervention, there have to be enough resources to ensure authority presence in the long term. Without these, the role of risk and crisis manager will be taken by

someone else. The results of this study call for more proactive authority communication that would build trust and establish a dialogue with citizens before crises occur. Just as the recent Stockholm Accords (2010) suggest, meeting stakeholders' information needs and expectations are central for organizational survival in the new online environment.

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