Chapter 3
The Role of Micro-Blogging in Responding to Corporate Controversy

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, social media has transformed personal and professional communication. The distributed nature of social media has contributed to its widespread dissemination, enabling individuals to discover, share, and comment on social issues and events happening around the world. In particular, the affordances of micro-blogging have enabled frequent and accessible communication between corporations and their consumers; thus, crisis response is an especially important use of micro-blogging sites such as Twitter for corporations. This chapter explores ways micro-blogging can be used to respond to corporate controversies and the public outrage brought on by such controversy as expressed through social media. Using the official Twitter accounts of corporations dealing with controversy as sites of analysis, the authors analyze how these corporations use their official Twitter accounts to respond to controversy and provide insight into the roles micro-blogging can play in responding to corporate crisis.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, social media has transformed the ways people communicate in their personal and professional lives. The distributed nature of social media has contributed to its widespread dissemination, enabling individuals to discover, share, and comment on political, economic, and social issues and events happening around the world. Participants in social media engage in communities that can be described as networked publics, the imagined communities that emerge “as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice” (boyd, 2014, p. 8). These networked publics afford participants the opportunity to communicate with friends, acquaintances, co-workers, companies, governments,
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and others, all at the same time and in a publicly accessible, often archivable space. In particular, the affordances of social media have enabled frequent and accessible communication between corporations and their consumers (i.e., consumers). As such, recent scholarship in the fields of professional communication, public relations, and business, among others, has demonstrated that social media offers a rich line of inquiry to discover the different ways that companies use these sites as tools for corporate communication, promotional and branding purposes, and crisis response.

Indeed, crisis response is a particularly important use of social media by nonprofits, government agencies, and private corporations. Twitter, for example, has been used as a communication management tool in multiple crisis response situations: Hurricane Katrina and the London bombings in 2005 (Potts, 2014); the 2007 and 2008 California wildfires; the 2008 Mumbai massacre; the 2009 crash of US Airways Flight 1549; the 2010 Haiti earthquake; the 2011 Tunisian uprising (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011, p. 110); and Hurricane Irene in 2011 (Bowdon, 2014), among others. Through social media, citizens who were previously dependent upon those in power to serve as their voice have capitalized on the affordances of social media to have their own voices be heard; they now can harness the power of social media to vehemently challenge institutions and authorities on important issues (Lovett, 2014; Segerberg & Bennett, 2011; Vie, 2014). While the open, often unfiltered qualities of social media communication can result in public criticism of corporate and government entities, they also offer opportunities for effective response by these same groups (Beesley, 2012; Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011).

Twitter, a micro-blogging site that limits users to 140 character posts, is one such platform that is widely used by corporations to connect with consumers, promote information, and comment on issues and events relevant to their business. Twitter’s micro-messages (tweets) are short and easily consumed, and its hashtag function and trending feature enables searchable and widely disseminated topical communication. Based on these affordances, this social media platform is one of the most opportune for the facilitation of productive two-way conversations between companies and their consumers (Mamic & Alvarez, 2013; Waters & Jamal, 2011; Zhang, Jansen, & Chowdhury, 2011). As well, the ease of composing and disseminating messages in Twitter, as well as the simplicity of responding to customers’ concerns, makes micro-blogging services like Twitter ideal for rapidly responding to consumers, including during moments of crisis. In fact, this rapidity is now expected by the majority of consumers; during times of crisis in particular, stakeholders “demand an immediate, thorough and unqualified response from organizations. Anything less might be seen as stonewalling” (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2001, p. 160).

Social media, including micro-blogging platforms, thus play an important role in corporations’ communicative strategies—both every day and during times of crisis. To gain insight into how companies might respond to controversy and crisis surrounding their business, Muralidharan, Dillistone, and Shin (2011) studied how the British oil and gas company BP used social media to take responsibility for their role in the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the largest in United States history, and worked to rebuild their tarnished public identity. Their findings demonstrated that BP took positive steps to accept their mistakes, including taking responsibility for the spill, compensating affected individuals and businesses, and paying for clean-up efforts, but that these social media strategies were not enough to eliminate or assuage all negative audience comments (Muralidharan, Dillistone, & Shin, 2011, p. 231). While the authors’ study accounted for audience response to BP’s social media posts about the oil spill, it did not account for how the company responded to those responses by facilitating two-way conversation with their consumers. As an extension of these researchers’ study, this chapter fills a crucial gap in the literature by exploring the ways in which micro-blogging might be used not only to respond to critical and
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