Role of Social Media in Terrorism Crisis Communication:
A Case of Westgate Mall Terror Attack in Nairobi

Stephen Gichuhi Kimotho, United States International University – Africa, Nairobi, Kenya
Carolyne Nyaboe Nyarang’o, Daystar University, Nairobi, Kenya

ABSTRACT

Terrorism targeting corporate bodies remains one the greatest risks to the most critical intangible asset of any organization: reputation. Thus, effective crisis communication is critical during and after terror crisis to mitigate further damage on the reputation. To date, many studies around the globe have tended to focus on the role of the traditional media during terror crisis, paying minimal attention to organisations’ use of social media during terror crisis. Using a descriptive qualitative case study, this study examined the role of social media during 2013 Westgate Mall terror attack, in Nairobi, Kenya. Findings revealed that the Interior Ministry (IM) used Twitter as the preferred social media platform to communicate with various stakeholders. Accommodative crisis response strategies were the most used by the IM. However, the ministry was plagued with inaccuracies and inconsistencies in its responses on social media compromising reputation of the government further. Balancing the need for speedy response, accuracy and consistency, remained the greatest challenge for the IM.

KEYWORDS

Attribution Theory, Crisis Communication, Crisis Communication Strategy, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Social Media, Terrorism, Westgate

INTRODUCTION

On September 21st, 2013 masked gunmen stormed Westgate Mall in Nairobi killing at least 67 people and injuring more than 200 in a hostage situation that lasted for four days. News of the attack broke out on social media immediately and by afternoon Westgate Mall terror crisis was trending. Despite updates from Interior Ministry through its Twitter account @InteriorKE, warning Kenyans to keep off the mall, the nature of the crisis remained vague for a while. The Westgate Mall terror attack was characterised by the complexity of events on social media and particularly on Twitter. A while later, images of injured people and dead bodies from the scene began to circulate on Twitter and Facebook and that is when it became apparent that Westgate Mall was under terror attack. The Somalia-based and Al-Qaeda affiliated terrorist group known as Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the attack through its Twitter account. From emergency rescue by the Kenya Red Cross, to military operations,
to government statements and media interviews, to victims and survivors’ accounts of the attack, to speculations and rumours about the attack; all were covered in detail by various social media platforms.

As Simon et al. (2014) observes social media, and mainly Twitter, have emerged as significant, near real-time channels of passing critical information across various stakeholders during crisis situations. Social media allows the stakeholders to exchange crisis news, conversations, opinions and also exchange user generated content; qualities that make them preferred channels for the stakeholders.

Empirical studies on the use of social media during and after a terrorist attack have tended to focus on diverse themes. For instance, numerous scholars have focused on the user and usage of social media platforms during and after terror attack. For instance, using a case study analysis of social reactions to the murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby in 2013 in London; Innes, Roberts, Preece, and Rogers (2018) identified 10-Rs of post-attack social reaction in cyberspace, which consists of Reporting, Requesting, Responding, Recruiting, Risking, Retaliating, Rumouring, Remembering, Reheating, and Resiliencing. Other studies on user and usage of social media include: Fischer, Eismann, and Fischbach (2016); Smyrnaios and Ratinaud (2017); Dobreva and Innes (2019); Bunker, Mirbabaie, and Stieglitz (2017).

Another area of focus by scholars has been on sense making. Studies on sense making are often informed by the fact that terrorism crises, like all other forms of abrupt crises, create uncertainty which leads to knowledge gaps. In a bid to bridge such gaps, stakeholders, through social media communication, resort to sense making communication events. Among the studies in this category include: Mirbabaie and Zapatka (2017); Stieglitz, Bunker, Mirbabaie, and Ehnis, (2018); and Stieglitz, et al., (2017). Studies mainly from media scholars have tended to focus mainly on framing of terror messages by the users as well as the strategies used by journalists and editors to verify user-generated content during terrorist crises. Scholars in this category include: Rauchfleisch, Artho, Metag, Post, and Schäfer, (2017); Wasike, (2013); and Kwon, Chada, and Pellizzaro, (2017).

Coombs (2015) contended that terror crisis poses a significant reputation damage to the organization involved. Reputation refers to the sum of all perceptions that stakeholders have of the organization. As such, in the event of a crisis, the organization employs various crisis response strategies to mitigate further damage to its reputation. Scholarly work focusing on how organizations (particularly government or governmental organizations), use social media platforms to mitigate reputation damage, during and after terrorism attack, are limited, and the few that exist were carried out in the developed countries. An example of such studies include Crijns, Cauverghe, and Hudders, (2017) who studied terrorism threat in Belgium and the resilience of Belgian citizens and the protection of governmental reputation by means of communication.

Crijns, Cauverghe, and Hudders study is relevant to the current study and provides a spring board in our attempt to address the dearth of scholarly research on how organization use crisis response strategies, through social media platform (like Twitter) to mitigate further reputation damage during and after terror crisis. Towards that goal, this descriptive qualitative study of the Westgate terror attack set out to achieve two key objectives: i) to describe the response strategies used by the government of Kenya through the Interior Ministry’s to protect its reputation on social media; and iii) to describe the public’s (social media users’) perception of the attribution of responsibility for the crisis.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

A crisis is an unpredictable event that presents real or potential negative outcomes such as financial loss, deaths and injuries and reputation damage for organisations, their stakeholders, and their industries (Coombs, 2012). Terror crises are intentionally caused and often attract significant attention from the media and other stakeholders. Terrorism refers to the use of violence as a method of combat with political aims and motives designed to have far-reaching economic, social and psychological repercussions, beyond the immediate victim or target (Hoffman, 2006). The 2015 Global Terrorism Index (GTI) paints a gleam picture of the global status of terrorism. According to the GTI report
Communication Process of Disaster Management: Shift From Web 2.0 to Web 3.0
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/communication-process-of-disaster-management/183485?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/communication-process-of-disaster-management/183485?camid=4v1a)

Simulation and Analysis of Mass Casualty Mission Tactics: Context of Use, Interaction Concept, Agent-Based Model and Evaluation
[www.igi-global.com/article/simulation-and-analysis-of-mass-casualty-mission-tactics/144347?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/simulation-and-analysis-of-mass-casualty-mission-tactics/144347?camid=4v1a)

An Overview of Cryptography
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/an-overview-of-cryptography/90714?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/an-overview-of-cryptography/90714?camid=4v1a)