A Triad of Crisis Communication in the United States: Social Networks for Social Change in the Obama Era

Mahmoud Eid, Department of Communication, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada
Jenna Bresolin Slade, Department of Communication, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada

ABSTRACT

The United States experienced a core-shaking tumble from their pedestal of superpower at the beginning of the 21st century, facing three intertwined crises which revealed a need for change: the financial system collapse, lack of proper healthcare and government turmoil, and growing impatience with the War on Terror. This paper explores the American governments’ and citizens’ use of social network sites (SNS), namely Facebook and YouTube, to conceptualize and debate about national crises, in order to bring about social change, a notion that is synonymous with societal improvement on a national level. Drawing on democratic theories of communication, the public sphere, and emerging scholarship on the Right to Communicate, this study reveals the advantageous nature of SNS for political means: from citizen to citizen, government to citizen, and citizen to government. Furthermore, SNS promote government transparency, and provide citizens with a forum to pose questions to the White House, exchange ideas, and generate goals and strategies necessary for social change. While it remains the government’s responsibility to promote such exchanges, the onus remains with citizens to extend their participation to active engagement outside of SNS if social change is to occur. The Obama Administration’s unique affinity to SNS usage is explored to extrapolate knowledge of SNS in a political context during times of crises.

Keywords: American Economy, American Healthcare, American Politics, Citizen Involvement, Crisis Communication, Grassroots Movements, New Media Technology, Social Change, Social Network Sites, War on Terror

INTRODUCTION: AMERICAN CRISES OF THE DECADE

At the beginning of the 21st century, a renowned superpower faced three crises—economic, social, and political. In the United States, seemingly infallible large banks and the iconic American auto industry succumbed to an economic collapse, requiring massive restructuring and emergency government bailouts numbering in the billions. Culminating in the fall of 2008, the financial crisis was prompted by the subprime mortgage predicament, resulting in severe domestic consequences, and affecting the world financial system. While the American government claims that progress is being made,
the road to recovery is undoubtedly long and still unpaved.

The social crisis of the American healthcare system compounds the financial insecurity of many American families, as millions of citizens are uninsured, and purchasing health insurance with an existing condition is nearly impossible. Presidents such as Bill Clinton and Barack Obama have attempted passing legislation for healthcare reform to reduce the burden on taxpayers and hospitals; however, factions exist within the debate—some want a single payer system or a government public option, while others feel that government healthcare intervention is unconstitutional and inefficient and advocate that private insurance companies should compete in the market place.

Additionally, the War on Terror continues to drain resources, public morale, and human lives. President Obama’s announcement in December 2009 of a troop surge of 30,000 has resulted in adverse effects. More than 5,000 soldiers have been killed since the beginning of the war, motivating Americans to become increasingly impatient (especially in Afghanistan) with the situation that both they and congress initially supported. Americans are demanding change, and despite its diverse meaning, supporters agree that change is synonymous with improvement to the current state of the nation; citizens are increasingly turning to new media technologies to voice their opinions. Society’s adoption and usage of these news advancements implies a vicissitude of considerations regarding technoethics—a field of study “concerned with all ethical aspects of technology within a society shaped by technology” (Luppicini, 2009, p. 4).

The Internet’s unique abilities to connect individuals beyond the confines of geography and social status allow citizens of the United States to posit their opinions without prevarication in a public sphere-like arena. Jürgen Habermas (1989) illustrates a social society in which members congregate to discuss common issues and deliberate on solutions. Through Habermas’ (1976) four validity claims, this paper demonstrates that the two-way communicative interplay between government and the people through social networks fulfills the requirements of valid and transparent communication. Furthermore by Manuel Castells (2006, 2007) work on networks and mass self-communication and danah boyd’s (2004, 2006) pioneering work on social network sites, this paper explains how citizens conceptualize the crises and their role, alongside government, in actively effecting social change through online communication. The paper also draws on the suggestions for social engagement and activism by Hannah Arendt (1958) and William James (1910). This paper maintains that, based on John Dewey’s (1916) theory on the human right to communicate, in order for social change to come about, the passion of the people must be channeled and a consensus must be reached. The foundation and platform for the facilitation of change is the online forum.

This paper explores the ways in which Americans online, namely through Facebook and YouTube, conceptualize national crises and communicate with government to bring about social change, a notion that is synonymous with societal improvement on a national level. Knowing how users understand and discuss the state of affairs allows the government to understand not only what citizens are discussing, but how they are doing so. Social media allow citizens to garner greater government accountability and transparency, which is not only conducive to collaborative social change, but also fosters the classic function of media as the watchdog of government through the more modern advanced approach of the online world. The end result allows the government to understand the dichotomy between two-way communication methods as it relates to citizens and fulfill its mandate of serving the wants and needs of the people.

**CITIZEN ACTION AND THE PUBLIC’S RIGHT TO COMMUNICATE**

In *The Moral Equivalent of War*, James (1910) claims that society comes together during times
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