Beyond Official: Government Information Work through Personal Accounts

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Abstract

This research demonstrates how government information workers employed different communication strategies through social media after a mass-causality event. Effectively using social media for some government functions may blur the lines between official work and the personal boundaries of government workers, thus raising privacy concerns for government employees.

Author Keywords

Crisis informatics; social computing; privacy; policy

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3 Groups & Organization Interfaces—collaborative computing, computer-supported cooperative work

Introduction

The government employees responsible for communicating with the public during crises, Public Information Officers or PIOs, are expected to have strategies in place to communicate with specific publics such as those who are directly affected by a crisis [2]. Their ability to communicate with specific groups has

been radically altered in recent years by network-enabled technologies [6]. These technologies have brought new opportunities and new challenges to crisis response [3]. Social computing in particular has been a disruptive force, changing the information practices of the public, the media, and the government: The public has taken on new roles such as *Digital Humanitarian* [4] and *Crisis Mapper* [8]. Journalists have found new ways of fulfilling their role with the help of a networked crowd [1]. And government responders have struggled to accommodate these changes in their own crisis work [3]. This research considers how PIOs reached specific publics in the course of a single disaster event.

Background

The 2014 Oso Landslide tragically took the lives of 43 people, destroying a rural enclave in Washington state. Some 30 government agencies were involved in the response and recovery which lasted several months. Dozens of Public Information Officers (PIOs) and other government workers collaborated to share information with the public.

Research Approach

This research relies on data from a) twenty-two on-site interviews with responders and community members and b) trace data provided by interviewees and c) publicly posted digital traces from websites, Facebook pages, and a collection of roughly one million tweets. Using a grounded approach [5], we conducted a trace ethnography [7] whereby we identified key information resources that the affected community relied on, then uncovered the skills, work, and resources involved in making particular information artifacts useful to the affected community.

Findings

Different Publics, Different Platforms
PIOs from multiple agencies viewed Twitter as a means for interacting with media and external audiences while they associated Facebook with reaching the affected community. They made regular use of both platforms, selectively using each as they viewed appropriate to reach specific publics.

Official Accounts, Official Information

Official government accounts were successful for some communication functions after the Slide. This tweet started an information cascade as it was widely retweeted by regional media.

Most social media interactions with government actors as described by PIOs in interviews and as visible in the public digital record took place through official government accounts. For example, while not the first account to tweet about the Slide, the first tweet from a government account (@wspd7pio) was rapidly retweeted by several regional media outlets thereby alerting the larger public (see above). Similarly, official information proliferated through Facebook from government Pages.

Official Information, Personal Accounts
On Facebook, information diffuses differently depending on whether a message originates with an organization

"I just basically had to make peace with the fact that my Facebook could be subject to public disclosure.

You know, that's not my ideal because, obviously, it's my personal Facebook, but that was the only option.

We got so much value out of that, that I just sort of made my peace with it."

- A State PIO

or an individual. Affected communities made intensive use of locally managed Facebook Groups, Pages, and private messages threads. Using only organizational Pages limited PIOs ability to interact with the affected communities "where they were."
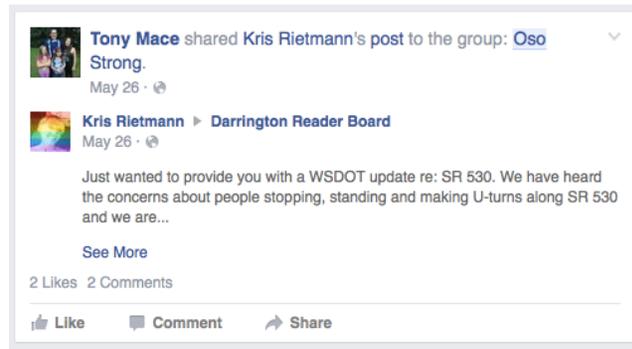
A message from WSDOT PIO Kris Rietmann's personal account is cross-posted from one Facebook group to another.

To better reach the affected community, Washington Department of Transportation developed a communications strategy whereby a handful of WSDOT personnel were selected to maintain a consistent "face" to the community for the duration of the event. Some employees used personal Facebook accounts to improve their communication with the affected community. Both in-person and Facebook communication was maintained by these select individuals. Complementing the face-to-face strategy of "continual meetings" that emphasized the PIOs as a "listener" rather than a communicator, one PIO was designated to join Facebook Groups and Pages using her personal account. She friended local "power users," direct-messaging them information to share with their community. This strategy proved effective

for traditional PIO functions like "rumor patrol" but had additional benefits as well. The rich interactions between the WSDOT employees who implemented this strategy and the affected community became a conduit for local opinion and knowledge that was diffused by WSDOT to multiple government agencies and functions thereby contributing to the overall response beyond WSDOT's mandate.
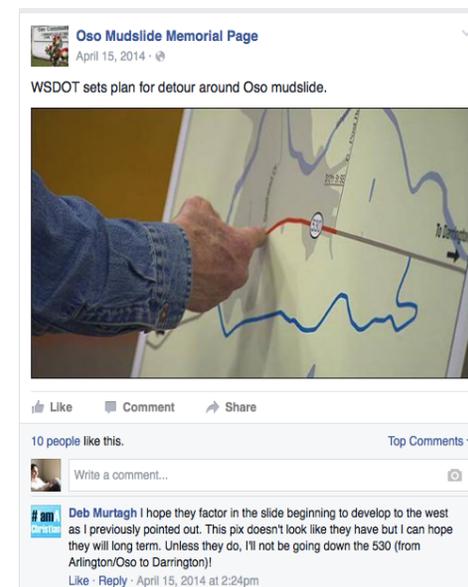
Organizational accounts are constrained from interacting directly in Facebook conversations like this one.

Personal Accounts, Personal Risk
While using personal accounts was effective, some government interviewees feared employing this strategy because personal accounts may then be considered part of the official public record and therefore subject to public information laws pertaining

to government records such as the Freedom of Information Act.

Conclusion

The communication strategy individual PIOs employed differed depending on who they were trying to interact with. They viewed Twitter as primarily a platform for interacting with the media and external publics who were not affected by the disaster. They viewed Facebook as a means of reaching the affected communities. However, official accounts had a limited reach on Facebook. Therefore some government workers used personal accounts to interact with the affected communities. By friending and direct messaging local "power users" and by joining Pages and Groups where local conversations were taking place, these government workers had richer interactions with community members. However, this approach raised privacy concerns among some government interviewees who worried about their personal accounts becoming public records due to their use for official purposes.

Future Work

These findings suggest the need for deeper exploration into how design and policy might shift to better support effective interactions between government employees and affected publics while maintaining privacy and transparency standards.

Acknowledgements

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