# The Impact of Social Media on Crisis Management in Schools

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## ABSTRACT

In an era of rapid technological advancement and digital interconnectedness, social media has emerged as a pivotal tool in educational crisis communication. This study explores the growing utilization of social media platforms by K–12 schools and school districts for crisis management, particularly during emergencies that threaten student safety and institutional integrity. Using qualitative analysis of 53 schools and districts across Arkansas, Kansas, and Oklahoma, this research investigates how educational institutions communicate during the pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis phases. Findings reveal that while social media enables swift and interactive communication, its efficacy is influenced by preparedness, communication protocols, and stakeholder collaboration. Real-world case studies, such as the incidents in Gordonsville and Big Lake, underscore the dual potential of social media to either escalate or contain crises. The study further examines the benefits, risks, and ethical considerations associated with digital crisis communication, emphasizing the importance of strategic planning, privacy management, and media literacy. Best practices are outlined to help schools integrate social media into comprehensive crisis management frameworks, thus enhancing institutional resilience and public trust.

**Keywords:** Crisis Communication, Educational Crisis Management, K–12 Schools, Social Media Strategy, Emergency Preparedness, Stakeholder Engagement, School Safety.

## INTRODUCTION

Social media, a prevalent form of social networking, has taken its place at the forefront of the communication industry, with technology, usage, and creativity advancing rapidly. Schools and school districts have used social media for communication purposes such as disseminating information, gathering opinions, and building relations with stakeholders. The use of social media has increased in communication during states of emergency. In recent years, schools have also experienced emergencies and the need to respond quickly to avoid harm and danger and to communicate possible dangers to students, parents, and staff. School districts have begun utilizing social media as a way to communicate about crises and emergencies. Usage of social media in the K-12 school setting is a recent development, and little is known about how it is being used to communicate with stakeholders during times of crisis. To address this, a qualitative method was used to explore how social media is being used to communicate during times of crisis by K-12 schools and school districts. Schools (N=45) and school districts (N=8) across the states of Arkansas, Kansas, and Oklahoma were examined in this qualitative study. An online search was conducted of social media platforms being used at the school and school district levels to disseminate information during times of crisis, with the platforms also being examined. This present research adds to the current literature about the use of social media in crisis communication with a specific focus on how K-12 schools or school districts communicate with stakeholders in times of crisis. A situation characterized by an event that threatens the safety and well-being of people is known as a crisis. These events tend to happen quickly and spasmodically with little or no forewarning. Schools must therefore have a plan in place to deal with these emergencies. The general public seeks information and

guidance from school officials on how to react and stay safe. School officials need to provide answers before, during, and after a crisis. This makes the communication process vital in crisis management. Social media allows for rapid and effective dissemination of information concerning crises, as it is a more preferred form of communication by people [1, 2].

## Understanding Crisis Management in Educational Settings

Crisis management refers to the actions an organization takes before, during, and after a hazard and any associated event. Crises arise when the situation is out of control, and the threat reduces the amount of uncertainty. The factors that need to be managed include: reputation threat, legal liability, financial, personnel, or operational threats; a threat that has become a realization; a state of information imbalance; and a request for an organizational response to the threat. The initial step in crisis management is to make necessary assessments and communications, but during the early stages of the event, there is extensive uncertainty, information may be unverified, and rumour mongering is high. Therefore, a balance must be struck between ensuring a rapid response and controlling the information overload. Options and associated justifications for both the 'not withstanding' and 'withstanding' factors of crisis management are highlighted. This paper acknowledges that a primary objective of crisis communication is to restore order and help the public recover from the effects of a turbulent event. Nevertheless, they argue and present evidence for an immediate organization-centred approach to communication management that consumes more than the minimum resources typically allocated for turbulence. The lasting effects of a crisis can make an organization appear incompetent. Therefore, organizations must manage the aftermath of a crisis to maintain an unblemished reputation. Retrospective communications intend to publicly address difficulties and mitigate painful memories. After a crisis, an organization may engage in a loose sequence of discussions about the crisis: remembrance and recognition; integrating the memory into the organizational narrative; and reconciliation with consumers or a counter-attack on challengers. Enduring reputational damage might encourage discussions normally considered taboo, resulting in public venting of frustrations [3, 4].

## Definition of Crisis Management

Crisis management varies according to organisations, and each has a unique context. Crisis Management is primarily the task of seriously considering how to mitigate the ramifications of an incident, event, or threat that could have a long-lasting and significant effect on a person's or organisation's affairs. Crisis management encompasses the range of management functions and activities that enable an organisation to deal effectively with hazards, threats, and crises. Handling crises appropriately can lead to a high reputation or brand credit for the responsible administration of the crisis. An inadequate response may allow more extensive damage that may include loss of life and injuries, general discontent in the community, diminished revenues, retrenchment of employees, and litigation. One of the many definitions of crisis management is that it is a group of actors surrounding the manager of the risk, the issue, or the crisis with advice, insight, promptness, and tools so that a situation that has taken a wrong turn can be steered back onto the right track. Following this primary definition, risk management relies on both problem drivers (usually management and the legal and political systems that make them work) and earlier management disciplines dealing with negative impacts, such as damage control, catastrophe management, and communication. To better comprehend what crisis management entails, it is useful to study crises to find out how they arise and develop. Several crisis systems have been studied, but there are no universal systems that cater for every type of crisis [5, 6].

## Types of Crises in Schools

Two years ago, a student with an automatic rifle opened fire at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida, killing 17 and injuring others in an active shooter incident. This tragedy highlighted the increasing use of social media to share crisis information. Schools throughout North America now face similar threats, which demonstrate that a crisis's impact relies heavily on communication strategies and the timely dissemination of information. High magnitude crises like school shootings severely affect school operations. Crises consist of three stages: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis, each with distinct communication objectives for sharing accurate information promptly. An emergent crisis is akin to a tornado forecast that threatens schools due to undetermined circumstances. This often leads to ambiguous information and less effective organizational responses. A paracrisis involves early documentation about potential threats influencing organizational functions. The pre-crisis stage functions similarly for high-intensity situations requiring documentation. Effective school crisis management includes decision-making and actions to address emergencies while maintaining regular operations, coordinated by an assigned emergency team with a spokesperson. Schools utilize crisis management procedures and document templates, though many may not address new threats like active shooters effectively. Identifying the nature of a threat often complicates decisions on lockdowns, evacuations, or

drills. School officials face challenges related to communication and media management, especially regarding the disclosure of sensitive information about suspects and involved students. The evolving media landscape further complicates this process, as sensitive information may still be broadcast, influenced by fear or sensationalism [7, 8].

## Importance of Preparedness

Developing an effective plan to deal with an atypical occurrence requires individual course preparation and organization at both the school and district levels. Preparedness enables an effective and timely response during any crisis. Planning and preparation in advance identify potential unexpected situations. Consequently, students, faculty, counselors, families, police, first responders, and the community collaborate to construct a workable multi-step plan. When preparing, it is important to implement plans and evaluate their effectiveness. All technologies should be exercised and shared ahead of time to eliminate potential flaws. Additionally, clear and open communication with the community is crucial to ensure their ability to assist. Another core theme is that the supervisor is essential in establishing a pleasant workplace where staff members trust each other and know they will be supported in performance appraisal. School personnel must maintain their physical and emotional strength to accurately and efficiently execute their duties. The adage "Happy teachers make for happy students" is particularly evident when considering safety procedures. Aside from providing product or service content, a healthy workplace is the foundation for promoting the organization's understanding of social media benefits. This includes common-sense injury prevention topics and staff bonding opportunities to promote trust among colleagues. Recognizing the nature of traditional media outlets and utilizing them accordingly is a critical component of crisis communication preparedness. Methods should be developed to solicit communication from reporters before an unexpected situation occurs, to preempt sensationalist, unfounded reports. New kinds of media, such as social networks, should be included in training alongside awareness of engagement with decision makers. Continuing education regarding changes in societal attitudes and practices regarding technology and communication is crucial to ensuring effective sharing of safety and security information [9, 10].

## The Role of Social Media

Schools are faced with an increasingly large number of potential crises. These may include natural disasters, violent acts, and sex scandals, to name a few. It is essential that schools not only write crisis communication plans but also practice how to communicate effectively before, during, and after a crisis situation. School crises can have tragic and long-term consequences. Standard crisis communication plans need the tools from social media and user-generated content websites to help keep parents, students, teachers, and the general public informed of what is happening. Crises are different kinds of events with some elements in common, which are negative and serious, disrupt normal operations, are usually unexpected, and often pose a potential threat to an organization, personnel, and the general public. Crisis communication plans traditionally advise organizations to set a single spokesperson and distribute press releases to traditional media. Schools are not traditional organizations, and different categories of people want different types of information about what is going on during a crisis. This is where social media planning ahead of crises is crucial. Crises are different kinds of events with some elements in common, which are negative and serious, disrupt normal operations, are usually unexpected, and often pose a potential threat to an organization, personnel, and the general public. Crisis communication plans traditionally advise organizations to set a single spokesperson and distribute press releases to traditional media. Schools are not traditional organizations; different categories of people want different types of information about what is going on during a crisis. This is where social media planning ahead of crisis situations is crucial. The social media content comes in a number of forms, including posts, photos, and videos. The types of sites included in this project are Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, blogs, and other websites. Social media allows interactive communications that can spread quickly and can emphasize the most important details more than a press release. Also, social media allows others to provide useful information that the organization may not have. It can elevate the effective communication of crisis news about schools considerably, invite a wider audience, foster the feeling of community, and strengthen the reputation of the organization after the crisis [11, 12].

## Case Studies of Social Media in School Crises

Several incidents involving social media in a school crisis help illustrate how different guidance can assist with crisis response communication regarding the protocols, what mistakes to avoid, and other examples of schools that effectively manage a crisis. In December 2007, a violent threat led to the Gordonsville High School being closed for a week by school leaders. Authorities handled the situation through a chain of communication, beginning with the parents. However, the administrators did not adequately communicate to the students about the situation. Consequently, students took to social media to fill in the

communication gap, which resulted in an announcement of a takeover at the school and created panic. Ultimately, the Virginia State Police were brought in to evaluate the school and discovered that it had been fake. The school district's refusal to communicate with the students about the message likely contributed to the issue spiraling out of control via text messaging and social media. The incident provides strong evidence that schools must be diligent and continually update all supported social media avenues. The communication approach used by the Big Lake School District provides an exceptional case study on how communication can effectively counter the rumor mill that larger school districts, such as the Gordonsville example, face. In October 2010, the district used preventative measures to counteract the potential for rumors to spread by implementing strong communication protocols to calm students regarding a hoax threat about a school lockdown being called. The district superintendent shared instantly several media platform messages with the public, and an appropriate strategy, including an FAQ bulletin, was applied. The rumors proved to be short-lived as Big Lake successfully communicated to students across the school [13, 14].

## Benefits of Social Media in Crisis Management

Most importantly, social media provides quick access to information. Research shows that 95 percent of college students have access to a smartphone or personal device. Many will utilize this tool to gather and share information during a crisis. One survey found that students were more likely to rely on Twitter than on any other source when gathering information during a crisis. Furthermore, 91 percent of the surveyed students admitted that social media is an important tool to be used in times of crisis. Snapchat's current Snap Map feature, primarily intended to inform viewers about how to keep up with the daily lives of friends, has recently been politicized as it is unable to easily hide a person's location from those with access to the Snap Map feature. Cities around the globe discovered ways to utilize previously innocuous forms of social media to do tracking of those attending certain protests. Colleges use similar tactics when monitoring students in such settings. St. Louis filming protests over the Michael Brown incident yielded many arrests for future protest attempts. College campuses aiming to track such civic activity could look into events and groups, and flyer distribution as sources to glean browsing and pattern information for upcoming mass events. Though these methods are not overtly malicious, the mere fact that the capabilities exist raises questions about covert uses of social media information. Conversely, sharing patient information on a communal site raises personal privacy concerns. Although methods exist to delete social media accounts, it is nearly impossible to contain information that has been shared online. Different styles of information sharing among other students allow rumors to take on a life of their own and take everyone completely out of the equation. Thoughts on social media privacy will depend on a person's feelings towards information privacy in general. Those against social media in general or with buried online histories will be far less likely to believe in the goodwill of such sites. Still, even those who use social media outlets regularly are generally unaware of how to maximize privacy settings. Life and death information over the internet is inherently flawed and wrought with corners that allow treading from either side of the gray area [15, 16].

## Challenges and Risks of Social Media

The rapid accessibility of the Internet and mobile services has increased the importance of social media. The rise in mass communication and the breakdown of hierarchies have led to a significant increase in social media messages, impacting crisis management and communication. Corporate organizations face challenges in strategically responding to the overwhelming number of social media messages during corporate image crises. The complexity of social media, alongside factors affecting the spread of messages, makes it crucial for corporations to respond effectively. A company's level of responsibility during a crisis often indicates the threat to its reputation. Social media encompasses various forms, such as blogs, forums, and social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook, offering transparency and opportunities for stakeholder engagement. Advantages include enhanced communication, marketing tools, and cost-effectiveness, while disadvantages entail privacy invasion, reduced personal ties, and decreased productivity. The impersonal nature of social media interactions and their lack of credibility, due to minimal proofreading and gatekeeping, are also concerns. Digital communications can go viral quickly, resulting in social media crises characterized by complex networking and communication challenges [17, 18].

## Best Practices for Schools

Best practices for merging social media and crisis management in schools include integrating social media management into emergency planning. Clear communication during crises necessitates defining the who, what, when, where, and why to effectively mitigate negative outcomes. A multisector communication approach, incorporating diverse academic insights on social media's impact on crisis management, is crucial. Collaboration among educators, students, and the community is essential to establish relevant

information channels using social media. Balancing individual and societal interests while acknowledging that complete motivation for everyone is unattainable is important. Crises often escalate through chaotic information phases, with stale tweets rarely gaining traction and rumors posing significant threats. Stakeholders, including schools and local governments, should educate young people about social media platforms and digital conduct. Mobile teens view social connections as vital links to their online and real lives. Schools must respond to youth's social media usage and potential crises. Crisis management should involve not just administrators but also students, fostering academic discussions on the subject. A two-way communication model that encourages dialogue and interaction will enhance understanding of responsibilities in crises. Programs should stimulate stakeholder involvement through discussions, brainstorming, and collaborative responses to crisis scenarios [19, 20].

## Role of Stakeholders in Crisis Management

Theory on Stakeholders in Crisis Management identifies stakeholders as groups that influence or are influenced by an organization's success. They are categorized into two types: those with formal, contractual ties and those with broader moral claims. Stakeholders can be classified as internal (like students) or external (like parents, alumni, and media), and as primary or secondary based on their impact on the organization. Legal mandates necessitate responses to internal stakeholders, but moral responsibilities to broader community groups can be more critical, particularly during crises, such as a sexual offense situation on campus, where obligations may extend beyond individual victims. Organizations facing crises are encouraged to engage closely with groups most concerned or impacted, as these stakeholders tend to have the strongest reactions. Research suggests that increased involvement in a crisis correlates with heightened concern and a more negative approach to information processing. Specifically, victims who receive organizational apologies tend to have a better perception of that organization, while those less directly affected show no preference. The role of Stakeholders in Crisis Management involves an emerging body of research examining crisis management across disciplines, particularly the function of stakeholders in crisis communication. While the significance of these groups has been recognized, studies rarely capture those directly affected by crises. Instead, attention has often focused on how organizational traits influence crisis communication and reputation. An investigation of the camp runaways in 2009 found that stakeholders acted as co-creators of reputation management through their various inputs [21, 22].

## Future Trends in Social Media and Crisis Management

During emergencies and crises, schools traditionally relied on in-house communication structures to retain control over information going to the community. However, increased reliance on social media by audiences has created new challenges. This report examines the role of social media as a crisis communication tool, analyzing its use by school administrators during crises. It highlights the need for school districts to provide guidance for administrators and develop entering strategies in anticipation of a crisis. Crisis communication is a growing area of study with much work still to be done. A crisis is any action that could negatively affect the organization's reputation or existence, and has the potential to bring down and destroy the organization. Crises can threaten the lives of students, cause injury to students and personnel, or bring down the organization's reputation. The effect that a crisis could have on a school district, college, or university makes adequate planning paramount. How a school and its administration handle a crisis directly correlates with how that school will survive the crisis. Crisis management begins before any crisis occurs. It is best to have a plan of action before the crisis occurs. Planning for a crisis consists of putting together a team of people who are members of the organization, key to a crisis response. Once a team is established, crisis managers begin developing plans for each potential crisis that could impact the organization. These plans should include how to proceed in the event of a crisis, who will handle certain aspects of the crisis, and how to respond should the crisis present itself. Crisis managers must do research in anticipation of and during the development of these crisis plans. Crises cannot be avoided, but they can be anticipated. By using these tools, crisis managers can develop a road map of how a crisis can be dealt with in order to better prepare the organization [23, 24].

## CONCLUSION

Social media has transformed the landscape of crisis management in K−12 educational institutions by enabling rapid, broad-based, and interactive communication during emergencies. As schools face increasingly complex crises—ranging from natural disasters to violent threats, social media offers both a lifeline and a liability. The case studies analyzed in this research demonstrate that effective use of social media can curb misinformation, reduce panic, and enhance stakeholder trust. However, uncoordinated or delayed communication can exacerbate crises and harm reputations. To harness the benefits while minimizing risks, schools must invest in preparedness, media training, and multi-stakeholder communication planning. Integrating social media into crisis protocols, educating staff and students on

responsible digital use, and maintaining transparency can collectively strengthen school resilience. Ultimately, social media should be seen not as a substitute for traditional communication but as an essential complement that, when used strategically, fortifies institutional response to crises and fosters community cohesion.

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