

Social media and crisis: The challenge of currency

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ABSTRACT

This review of *The Four Stages of Highly Effective Crisis Management: How to Manage the Media in the Digital Age* (CRC Press, 2011, 283 pages) discusses the inherent challenges of providing media relations advice in an era when social media is forcing communicators to re-invent their approach to crisis communications. The author points out that the rapid, ongoing evolution of social media itself makes the prediction of trends and development of crisis communication strategies very difficult. She acknowledges, however, that Jordan-Meier has effectively applied a media management methodology that should remain relevant and useful in the face of change.

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It takes no small amount of courage to tackle a topic in book form when you know that the topic is evolving at breakneck speed. Such is the challenge of writing about the impact of social media on crisis communications.

Australian crisis communications consultant, Jane Jordan-Meier, published *The Four Stages of Highly Effective Crisis Management: How to Manage the Media in the Digital Age* in 2011 (Jordan-Meier, 2011). As her book went to press, the BP oil spill had just occurred in the Gulf of Mexico, Tiger Woods' infidelity was still popular fodder for late-night comics, and Toyota's recall was just emerging as a classic example of how not to treat customers during a crisis.

While the currency of case studies is difficult to achieve in books about any type of professional practice, what makes an examination of the impact of social media particularly tough is that it is always changing, and changing fast.

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Despite this inherent challenge, Jordan-Meier has produced a useful resource for public relations professionals and business leaders who are trying to develop crisis communications plans that are nimble enough to remain relevant in this era of constant, extraordinary change.

The changes in social media that have occurred just since Jordan-Meier's book came out in 2011 are substantial to say the least. For example:

- In June of 2011, Google+ was launched as that company's multilingual, social networking site and, by April 2012, it had 170 million users (Google, 2012).

- Pinterest, the pinboard-style, photo-sharing site, was also launched in June 2011 and, by the February 2012 the site had 10.4 million users (Vaughan, 2012).

- Facebook was well entrenched as a social media tool – between June 2011 and March 2012, it grew from 710 million users to 835 million users worldwide (Internet World Stats, 2012). However, its financial viability as a vehicle for product marketing has since come into question and may have contributed to Facebook's lacklustre showing during its initial public offering in 2012 (Londis, 2012).

- In April 2012, Facebook purchased Instagram, the relatively new (October 2010) but wildly popular (30 million users) app that allows iPhone and android users to upload, share and talk about their photos (Instagram, 2012). Competition for Flickr and Pinterest, Instagram is garnering attention from businesses that want to share their brand story – a function that may well be critical during a crisis (Williams, 2012).

- Twitter revamped its format twice over the past two years, with the number of active Twitter users rising 40 per cent – from 100 million in September 2011 (Taylor, 2011) to 140 million in March 2012 (Twitter, 2012).

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but these examples illustrate how difficult it is to anticipate and plan for social media trends within the timelines required for conventional book publishing.

The question then becomes, are there overriding principles about the interface between crisis communications and social media that can withstand the dramatic changes that are occurring so quickly in social media? Jordan-Meier says yes – she believes that social media strategies can be successfully layered over good crisis communications practices and she agrees with other experts in the field that any crisis plan is incomplete without a comprehensive social media strategy.

In her preface, Jordan-Meier argues, quite correctly, that the social media “powerhouse” has revolutionized how crises are managed (Jordan-Meier, 2011, p. xv). The instantaneous response of social media to incidents and events of all kinds is driving not only the opinions of online publics, but also the responses of mainstream media.

Jordan-Meier’s book is a commendable attempt to merge the reality of social media with the principles of media management during a crisis. Her background as a journalist and media-training consultant, serves her well in this regard. In fact, she says that the crisis communications methodology that she developed with her consultancy partner, Susan Templeton, provides the central framework for this book.

Like Kathleen Fearn-Banks, the author of a leading text on crisis communications, now in its fourth edition, *Crisis Communications: A Casebook Approach* (Fearn-Banks, 2011), Jordan-Meier identifies specific stages in a crisis. There is merit in breaking down the evolution of a crisis – by doing so, organizations and their communicators are better able to anticipate how the crisis will play out, and prepare for each stage as effectively as possible.

Fearn-Banks’ description of stages is more wide ranging than Jordan-Meier’s. Fearn-Banks says there are five stages: detection; prevention/preparation; containment; recovery; and learning. She also offers a second framework with stages specifically related to media: breaking news; when concrete details become available; analysis of the crisis and its aftermath; and evaluation and critique of the crisis (Fearn-Banks, 2011).

Jordan-Meier’s framework is less inclusive than Fearn-Banks’. Jordan-Meier focuses on media relations only and identifies stages that more closely resemble Fearn-Banks’ description of crisis in news media, i.e.: fact-finding; the unfolding drama; finger-pointing stage – blame game; and resolution and fallout (Jordan-Meier, 2011). Jordan-Meier uses this narrower structure to take the reader through an extensive outline of what to expect and what to do at each stage. Her “what to do” lists and media management/media training tips are both perceptive and practical – excellent reference points for communicators preparing to deal with media, including social media, during a crisis.

A failing of Jordan-Meier’s book is that it does not include any discussion of crisis communications theories, and she thus misses an important opportunity to provide readers with valuable context. Public relations researchers and thought leaders have added a great deal to our understanding of how people respond to crises. Scholars have also illuminated many of the psychological and technical dynamics of social media activity during crises. In another edition, if there is one, Jordan-Meier’s readers would be well served with the inclusion of

sion of relevant communication theories.

Jordan-Meier also does not present as many crisis case studies as Fearn-Banks (Jordan-Meier includes 10, less detailed case studies, while Fearn-Banks has 15, highly detailed case studies.) In crisis management, narratives and documentation of past crises provide great learnings for novice and experienced communicators alike. Although Jordan-Meier offers many brief examples, more in-depth analysis of specific media and social media crises would enhance future editions of this book.

In the final section of the book and the appendices that follow, Jordan-Meier does a laudable job of providing an overview of social media tools and how to use them in a crisis. She has clearly worked hard to ensure that her research is current, as evidenced by her interviews with numerous experts and her many references to online resources. The information she has included is accurate and well explained but, as stated at the beginning of this review, new applications and tools are continually being introduced and existing social media are evolving. The reality is that no one can print a book about social media that is completely up to date.

That said, Jordan-Meier's overall advice to her readers is bang on. She believes that social media have heightened the importance of the principles of engagement, speed, trust and accountability. Although those principles have always been fundamental to effective crisis communications, they are even more crucial now.

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