#Ebola on Instagram and Twitter: How health organizations address the health crisis in their social media engagement

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Short Abstract

This study focused on social media platforms Twitter and Instagram and analyzed tweets and posts through the lens of risk communication theory. Using more positive/solution-based messages is crucial, as is the use of images and reassuring publics while informing them of the necessary details.

Abstract

The current Ebola outbreak is the most severe of its kind in history. As of October 2014, a total of 9,964 cases had been confirmed and 4,881 deaths had been reported. Public health organizations as well as nonprofit health organizations have been struggling to address the public's concerns as well as the need for accurate information regarding the outbreak as a global public health threat. Many public relations professionals see the photo- and video-sharing social media platform Instagram (with 150 million active users with an average of 55 million photos posted daily) as an effective platform for strategic health communications. Social media platforms and mobile technologies play an increasingly important role in infectious disease outbreak management, tracking, and information gathering. However, not much is known about online social media discussions about Ebola and the current outbreak.

This study analyzes the visual social media engagement on Instagram by three large health organizations (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, World Health Organization, Doctors without Borders) on the ongoing Ebola crisis. The three organizations have faced a two-fold crisis: how to communicate about Ebola crisis to the public, and as an organization, how to manage a reputational crisis due to the negative public sentiments on how the Ebola situation has been handled by the organization. In a quantitative content analysis, around 1,000 Instagram posts by the three organizations posted between January-December 2014 are analyzed, focusing specifically on Ebola-related hashtags, the type of information included, and the frequency of likes and comments by Instagram users on these posts. Further analyses on the public's social media engagement and organizational crisis response strategies are based on issue management and crisis communication theories.

The study is currently ongoing and will be completed by the end of 2014. It will provide the first analysis focused on how public health organizations address the current Ebola outbreak on Instagram. Hands-on action guidelines for public relations practitioners in the health sector will be provided based on the findings of the study.