The Sociology of Crisis: Social Communications Lessons from the Boston Marathon Attack

Jeannette Sutton, PhD
University of Colorado, Colorado Springs

Are disasters getting worse?
For the recordé
Social Communications

The world is becoming more connected; it is imperative to know how to communicate in a disaster or crisis

- Sender
- Channel
- Message
- Receiver
- Engage
Social Media & Disaster Research

A brief history of the field
Research Approach

- Data collection
  - April 15, 2013-April 19, 2013
  - Attempted a census (N=31) of official public safety accounts at the Federal, State, and local level
  - Content, network connections, follower numbers

- Data analysis
  - Mixture of automated and manual coding for message content and style
  - Regression modeling to assess mechanisms governing retweet probability

The receiver

Where to beginé
Who is your audience?

- The at risk public
- The inconvenienced public
- The inquisitive public
- The expressive public
- The helping public
- The socially vulnerable public

The channel & the message

Cultural and linguistic competence
## Message Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Recommended Message Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Who is giving the message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>When to begin and complete a protective action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Exactly who should and should not do the protective action; the geographical boundaries for the location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazard and Consequence</td>
<td>Describe the impending hazard, its consequences, the threat posed, and what they are being asked to do to reduce impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td>Exactly what to do and how to do it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Mileti & Sorensen, 1990*

---

## Message Style

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Recommended Message Style</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clarity</td>
<td>Simply worded, free of jargon, understandable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specificity</td>
<td>Precise and non ambiguous</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Mileti and Sorensen, 1990.*
Terse Regime Communication

- Brief messages (limited in character)
- Easily shared and retransmitted
- Crosses over many communication channels
  - Social media/Twitter (140 characters)
  - SMS (160 characters)
  - Wireless Emergency Alerts (90 characters)

Wireless Emergency Alert
Some things matter more than others

- Hazard impact (content)
- Hazard guidance (content)
- Instructional language (style)
- Inclusion of a #hashtag (style)

The sender
Monitor, networké
Increased Attention

Monitor

Twitter as a Sentinel in Emergency Situations: Lessons from the Boston Marathon Explosions

PLOS CURRENTS DISASTERS

The Telegraph

Boston marathon bombings: how social media identified wrong suspects

When the FBI released pictures of the Boston Marathon bombers onto the internet they unleashed a force they could not control.
Network

- Identify your partners
- Coordinate messages
  - To amplify
  - To reinforce
  - To remain consistent
- Determine your channel/s
  - #hashtags assist in the formation of ad hoc groups

Boston Bombing Official Tweets
Engage
Transactional communication

- How:
  - With empathy
  - With credibility

- What:
  - What is being done
  - What information is available

- Why:
  - To reassure
  - To enhance community efficacy and resiliency
Be Prepared

- For media intensity
- For viral nature of information spread
- For public scrutiny
- For ridicule
- For imposter accounts

Key lessons learned
Be Aware

- Linear model is outdated
- Persons who are "socially vulnerable" may be your audience
- Coordinate your channels
- Identify your partners
- Engage your audience to prepare for the future

Most Retweeted -- 125,000 Retweets

Boston Police Dept. @Boston_Police
CAPTURED!! The hunt is over. The search is done. The terror is over. And justice has won. Suspect in custody.
Expand
Thank you for listening!

Questions?

Jeannette Sutton, PhD
University of Colorado, Colorado Springs
jsutton2@uccs.edu

www.heroicproject.org