

Reputational Threats, Digital Rumors, Natural Disasters & Strategic Communication (Oh My!): A review of crisis cases & the STREMI model for social media crisis communication

Margaret C. Stewart, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Communication Studies
School of Communication , University of North Florida (UNF)
1 UNF Drive, Jacksonville, FL United States

Abstract: In 2016, STREMI was introduced as a model for communicating during crises via social media through a case study analysis of digital events occurring during Hurricane Sandy (2012). The model was later revisited during an application and analysis of digital communication during Hurricane Matthew (2016). As the model approaches its decade anniversary, this research presentation sets out to revisit STREMI for social media crisis communication as it relates to several specific and more recent cases of crisis events including the online rumors surrounding FEMA during Hurricanes Helene and Milton (2024) and the reputational (and threats) crisis faced by Anheuser-Busch with the Bud Light brand (2023). The STREMI model emphasizes the need for proactive and continuous social listening efforts and responsive engagement on social media channels, as well as digital crisis response evaluation and strategic change implementation by organizations and agencies prior to, during, and post-crisis. In order to establish strategic best practices, organizations, institutions, and agencies are encouraged to recognize and consider how social media can be both an agent of a crisis and a vital means for communicating accurate and timely information to stakeholders when crises arise.

Keywords — social media, crisis communication, social listening, community engagement, social consumer relationship management.

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INTRODUCTION

The key objectives of this research are to share an executive overview of the legacy STREMI model in previous research, discuss recent crisis cases that have unfolded and escalated based on social media activities, and provide strategic considerations for organizations, institutions, and agencies regarding STREMI tenets for social media crisis communication based on the occurrences emerging in the crisis cases. STREMI can be utilized as a model for research application to crisis case studies and is recommended to be continuously analyzed across a variety of crisis contexts including, but not limited to, natural disasters, such as hurricanes, as well as organizational crises, such as reputational threats, brand identity, and rumor management online. STREMI also has pragmatic implications for crisis practitioners who are seeking ways to develop or improve their strategic social media approaches within their digital crisis communication procedures.

STREMI MODEL FOR SOCIAL MEDIA CRISIS COMMUNICATION

The inaugural iteration of STREMI was developed in 2015 at the intersection of crisis communication best practices, strategic social media, and digital crisis management. Originally, STREMI was applied to social media events during hurricane Sandy in 2012 [1]. The first round of the model was described a six-phase cyclical model comprised of social listening, targeting audiences, responsive engagement, monitoring, interacting with consumers, and implementing changes [1]. The original STREMI model is presented in Figure 1 below [1]:

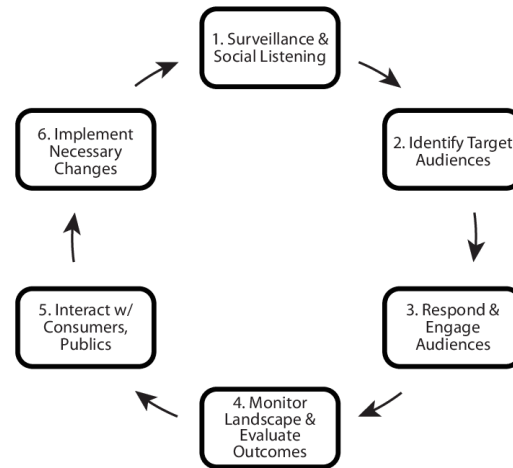
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FIGURE 1: Original Iteration of the STREMI Model for Social Media Crisis Communication



In 2018, the STREMI model was revised during scholarship of teaching and learning applying STREMI to crisis cases, and additional research applications to social media events during Hurricane Matthew in 2016 [2,3]. The second iteration recognizes the ongoing tenets of social listening and engaging responsiveness throughout all phases of the crisis (pre-crisis, during crisis, and post-crisis) and interwoven throughout all STREMI phases [2, 3].

FIGURE 2: Revised STREMI Model for Social Media Crisis Communication

Revisiting STREMI

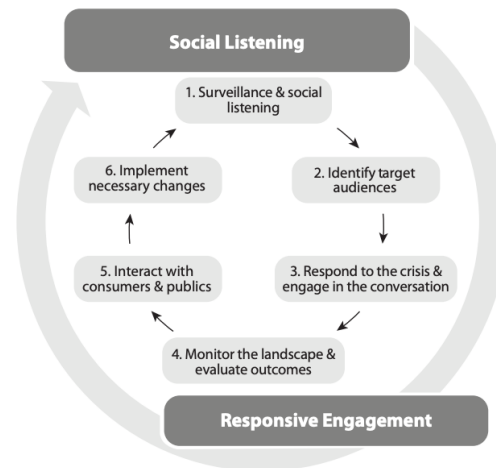


FIGURE 2 Revised STREMI model.

Given the shared emphasis on social listening and responsive engagement, this research looks at two (2) newsworthy crisis events and shares insights and recommendations that this researcher delivered during major media press interviews in recent years (2023-2024). As we approach the decade anniversary of the STREMI model for social media crisis communication, it is important to continuously evaluate the method in the given social media and digital communication landscapes. The ever-changing and persistent technological ecosystem has tremendous influence on contemporary crisis communication procedures, and social media become important crisis communication tools, despite their risk for misinformation [4,5].

CRISIS CASES

CASE 1: BUD LIGHT BACKLASH

In 2023, CNN's Danielle Wiener-Bronner authored "*Anheuser-Busch facilities face threats after Bud Light backlash*" describing the threats received by facilities following a week-long digital backlash against Bud Light because it sponsored Instagram posts featuring a transgender woman [6]. During the interview, shared statements include: "Once threats move into the real world, companies need to adjust their crisis management strategies, noted

Margaret Stewart, a certified Social Media Strategist for the National Institute for Social Media who also teaches communication at the University of North Florida's communication school. 'In a circumstance like this, once the online events [present] in a different and escalated way offline, this now requires a transition of crisis response,' said Stewart. More generally, she noted, the situation should serve as a reminder to brands that there are downsides to marketing on social media, where opinions expressed tend to be more polarized than in real life. "When we're taking to the social platforms to engage, it's usually because we're engaging on topics, content, what have you ... that we really like, or that we really dislike," she said [6].

CASE 2: FEMA COMBATS ONLINE RUMORS DURING HURRICANES

In the second case, NPR's Huo Jingnan writes "*How FEMA tries to combat rumors and conspiracy theories about Milton and Helene*" capturing that while FEMA has always dealt with rumors, the modern information landscape is dramatically different than decades past. "'We had folks that spent all day watching TV and listening to the radio that they heard something that we thought was troubling that wasn't true. We go out there and try [to] correct it,' said Haddow, the former Clinton-era FEMA official, of how the agency responded in the 1990s. Fast forward to 2012, when social media started to become important. 'The rumor mill for [Hurricane] Sandy was somebody...saying they had sharks in the subway system that flooded and they had a video showing a shark in the subway system,' said Haddow. 'Compared to what they're talking about now.' FEMA responded by getting on social media and setting up region- and language-specific accounts" [7]. For the interview, the following insights were provided: "Improving the public's media literacy also needs to be part of the solution, said Margaret Stewart, a professor at the University of North Florida who has developed a crisis communication framework that she recommends to government and businesses alike. "One of my biggest recommendations to social media consumers is the necessity now to go back to the original source ... of the digital information that they're consuming and to verify the information there before passing it on to the members of their social community," said Stewart [7].

LESSONS LEARNED FROM CRISIS CASES

In the first case pertaining to the reputational and physical threats regarding Bud Light, two important lessons emerge. First, social media continuously influences crisis communication and management practices. Second, we are living among a historical shift in strategic communication by organizations & stakeholders. The Internet and social media are complex and dynamic; thus, a risky environment that may invite consequences, online and offline. From the inception of organization's social presence online, social media have implications to an organization's reputation. The very nature and function of social media by empowering consumer voices and cultivating vast eWOM need to be considered as organization's create and distribute brand messages, distribute information, and engage & respond to stakeholders online during crises.

The noted historical shift in strategic communication by organizations and stakeholders resides in the ever-changing, persistent, and increasingly diversifying social media and digital communication ecosystem [5]. Unlike legacy mass media, the Internet and social media are inherently interactive. For the first time in history, consumers can have direct exchanges with organizations, brands, and other consumers. These traits emphasize the importance of responsive engagement. Feedback from consumers about brand messaging was limited to interpersonal electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which simultaneously reinforces the ongoing need for social listening.

Regarding the second case related to FEMA's social media crisis related to rumor management online, social listening is also restated. "To detect a social media crisis, watch for spikes in activity. If you notice a sudden increase in negative comments or mentions, it could be a sign of trouble" [8]. Responsive Engagement invites repair and relationship-building. "It's fast. The rapid spread of information on social media is both an opportunity and a challenge for your brand in times of crisis; 89% said a business could regain their trust if it admitted to a mistake and was transparent about how it would work toward a resolution. Transparency is huge—social gives you a direct channel to share your brand's position with your customers and community" [9].

Further, digital agility by organizations during crises is essential. When facing crisis, risk, or reputational threat on social media, "'brands need to be agile in responsiveness efforts throughout the crisis and be ready to acclimate their response to the needs of their consumers at that time...' Organizations must view response from their stakeholders' perspectives: Ask questions: Do we "see" social messages and content, and our online engagement, the same way our stakeholders and constituents do? Are our approach(es) and message(s) aligned with their needs? Are our messages and content designed and delivered accordingly?" This recommendation holds significant value on crisis communication on social media during natural disasters, which are inherently unpredictable despite preparedness efforts. Strategic communication during crises on social media is developing: 'The past few years have been a wake-up call for many brands. At the start of the pandemic, only 23% of US organizations reported having a dedicated crisis response team in place, according to PwC's 2021 Global Crisis Survey. Yet 62% of organizations used a crisis response plan during the pandemic'" [9].

CONCLUSION

In closing thoughts, this research marks the initial reflections upon a decade of development of the STREMI model for social media crisis communication in an evolving digital ecosystem. The present iteration of STREMI emphasizes the tenets and practices of social listening and responsive engagement before, during, and after crisis events. The cases of Bud Light's

reputational and physical threats and FEMA's online rumor management reveal several important lessons related to social listening and responsive engagement for effective social media crisis communication. Keep in mind the importance of digital agility in the diversifying digital environment, transparency and spikes in digital activity are both valuable items to consider, foster, and attend to. Lastly, we are underway with an enormous and ongoing digital migration wherein how, where, what, and why we use communication technologies, such as social media, to communicate online during crisis events will undoubtedly continue to evolve and change. Social media and mediated communication technologies (MCTs) are influential in effective crisis communication and crisis management and must be considered uniquely in crisis and risk preparedness and strategic planning.

Author Biography

Margaret C. Stewart, Ph.D., Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). Associate Professor of Communication Studies, School of Communication, University of North Florida (UNF). Contact: m.c.stewart@unf.edu.

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