Tweet Your Way Through Your Next Crisis?
Social Media and Crisis Communications

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Introduction

> Social media and the 24-hour news cycle are part of a fundamental change in our sociological structure. We all have to understand that there will never again be a major event in this country that won't involve public participation. And the public participation will happen whether it's managed or not. Before the oil spill, I had already started blogging and tweeting.
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> Admiral Thad Allen, USCG, (Ret.)[1]

For over 100 years SH&E professionals have been actively engaged in protecting people, property and the environment, though the fundamental roles and responsibilities have changed and evolved to meet the needs of changing times. The expanded role beyond safety into environmental and security concerns has been embraced by many; some long held postulates about injury causation have been debunked; a foundational change in paradigms that mandate the focus on prevention through design have been brought forth; and sustainability as a key driver in organizational strategy is part of ongoing discussions. Now it is time for SH&E professionals to embrace a new way of communicating with their audiences – social media.

Social media is rapidly becoming such an integral part of business operations that its use is now commonplace for essential product launches, developing consumer loyalty and sharing organizational news. Citizen journalists use social media to provide instantaneous information to their followers and the general public, often hours ahead of traditional media. ASSE Foundation Director and self-proclaimed "digital whisperer" Faye Feeney summarizes the current situation when she says:

Do you know someone who brags that they don't text, tweet or care about social media? I like to diplomatically tell these folks their digital zipper is down, and it not helping them look relevant.[2]

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[1] Harvard Business Review (2010). "You Have to Lead from Everywhere" [Interview with Thad Allen]. Retrieved from http://hbr.org/2010/11/you-have-to-lead-from-everywhere

[2] Feeney, F. (2012, June 25) "Social Media and #CorpGov" – 2012 ICGN Rio Annual Conference [Blog]. Retrieved from http://risk4good/2012/06/social-media-and-corpgov-2012-icgm-rio-annual-conference/

Savvy SH&E Professionals understand the power of communicating with their audiences, be it the internal workforce, organizational management, vendors/suppliers, community members or any one of a myriad of groups that rely on fast, frequent and accurate messages to relate to and understand the organization they represent. Given that their audiences and the organizations they work for are using social media at an increasing rate, it is critical for SH&E professionals to do the same as they strive to continually add value. In fact, a recent survey by the American Red Cross found that social media sites are the fourth most popular sites for obtaining information during an emergency.[3] It follows that it is no longer a matter of whether SH&E professionals should utilize social media to communicate within their organizations and to their audiences, but how and with what platforms.

SH&E professionals have welcomed and embedded technology into their day-to-day duties; from software that tracks training and injuries to audit formats that provide a snapshot of continuous improvement to customized dashboards that show multiple data streams on one screen shot. This paper will advocate the additional utilization of social media into many facets of organizational activities, most notably in crisis communications. It will address how social media provides an accessible format for communicating in real time with the types of messages audiences are seeking. It will provide a balanced overview of the pros and cons of using social media along with discussion of a sensible Social Media Policy that will help guide organizational activities. And it will take a look at some social media successes and failures to discern the lessons learned.

Social Media and Its Benefits

The overwhelming prospect of trying to engage in social media and where to start given the myriad of social media platforms likely inhibits many people, SH&E professionals among them. Additionally, as noted above, many would-be users see its usage as a time-waster and the purview of younger generations whose overarching stereotype is one of being connected more to their devices than they are to engaging with live people.

Social media encompasses many different types of opportunities to engage and obviously not all suit everyone – some classification systems identify 23 different platforms[4] and as of late 2012 there were over 330 different applications. Some of the more common and familiar include the following:

1. Blogs – Blogs represent a method of communicating opinions in a shortened form that is web-based rather than appearing in more traditional forms of print publications. Examples include Blogspot and Wordpress.
2. Microblogging – These sites allow for very, very short blogs - unlike typical blogs which are much longer. The most familiar is Twitter, whose 140 character limit was based upon the use of telecommunications to send messages via texts.

[3] American Red Cross. (2012) More Americans Using Mobile Apps in Emergencies [Press Release]. Retrieved from http://www.redcross.org/news/press-release/More-Americans-Using-Mobile-Apps-in-Emergencies

[4] Social Media Usage Toolkit. (n.d.) Overview. Retrieved from http://us.practicallaw.com/0-501-1201?q=social+media+toolkit

3. Social Networking Sites – The purpose of these sites is building relationships among people with similar interests and activities. The most familiar one currently is Facebook, although for years MySpace was the leader and Google+ is rapidly gaining dedicated users.
4. Professional Networks – The counterpart of social networks, these sites are intended to be limited to professional networking, allowing interaction, sharing of information and discussion of issues relevant to work settings. LinkedIn leads the pack in this category; Plaxo is another one that has a decent number of members.
5. Video Sharing – These sites allow users to upload video content. YouTube is the most common of these sites. While it started as a venue for personal videos, its usage for organizations has increased dramatically in recent years.
6. Content Driven Communities – These sites are less about interacting and more about sharing content among users. The most common of these is Wikipedia; a site that allows for any user to edit content by enhancing it or disputing content believed to be inaccurate.

In addition to identifying the types of social media platforms, new users should be cautioned to distinguish between those that lean to personal interactions and those that lean toward professional. For example, Facebook has traditionally been an arena where personal interactions occur, while LinkedIn has favored professional networking. Users may want to consider keeping professional and personal realms separate so that even though they may have interactions with professional colleagues on Facebook, the interactions tend to be more personal, discussing weekend plans, musical tastes, etc. Twitter users often have a personal handle and a professional one to separate the realms.

Despite some CEO's claims to the contrary, there are some generic benefits to organizational use of social media.[5] By connecting with professionals they might not otherwise meet, a unique method for sharing information, ideas and resources exists. Many would argue that it ultimately creates an increased level of productivity among users because their learning and knowledge base expands and thus their ability to complete work tasks. And it also creates a workforce that is more satisfied with their job and the organization they work for leading to higher levels of morale. A recent study published by Baylor University found that when an organization created an internal social media site to assist with onboarding its newest IT employees, many of whom were new to the area, they developed meaningful relationships within and outside of the organization. Further, they felt higher levels of job satisfaction; organizational learning at all levels, and had an increased commitment to the organization.[6]

A related benefit is that harnessing collective knowledge through collaboration increases the ability of an employee to identify and craft best practices. Finally, but not to be discounted is the natural desire and need of human beings to interact. Says Brian Gray: "Human beings are social animals and are hard-wired to connect".[7] Allowing employees to have a method to satisfy this need creates more contented employees who in turn are more creative and productive.

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[5] Gray, B. (2012, June 21) Don't Fear the Dragons: Why the Social Web Should Be Part of Your Work Day [Blog]. Retrieved from http://www.continuityinsights.com/print/blogs/2012/06/dont-fear-dragons-why-social-web-should-be-part-your-work-day
[6] Koch, H.; Gonzalez, E.; Leidner, D. (2012) Bridging the Work/Social Divide: the Emotional Response to Organizational Social Networking Sites. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 21(6):699 DOI 10.1057/ehis/2012.18.
[7] Gray (2012, June 21)

While some organizations discount the value of social media in the workplace, no less than the United Stated Army recognizes its importance in its Social Media Handbook; encouraging soldiers to use the platforms to become its best messengers, to stay connected, and spread the Army's key themes and messages[8]. Further, "CEOs going social" was cited by the Huffington Post in an article summarizing the key reputation trends for 2013. The article suggested those CEOs who engage with both employees and customers will be the new corporate leaders. The number of engaged CEOs is expected to rise from 16% to 57% in the next five years.[9]

Who Uses Social Media and Implications for SH&E Professionals
Undoubtedly young people are the predominate users of social media, but recent studies confirm that usage in older age groups is growing, in part because the original users of social media are aging and continuing to use it. However, studies also show that 66% of all adults use one or more social media platforms. The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project says "it took radio 38 years to reach 50 million listeners. Terrestrial TV took 13 years to reach 50 million. But in four years after it became available to the general public, the Facebook social networking site had over 500 million users."[10]

According to recent reports from the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 92% of Americans use multiple platforms to get their news – 60% get their news both on and offline. The same study in 2012 found that the proportion of online adults who use Twitter on a typical day is now 8%, double the amount since a survey completed in May 2011, quadrupling since data was first collected in late 2010. Twitter use is highly correlated with the use of mobile technology; as the usage of smart phones and tablets has increased among all adults, the usage of Twitter has grown similarly.[11]

Although it may be interesting to hear about increased in social media usage, what this shift means for SH&E professionals is important to understand. At the very least, SH&E professionals wishing to communicate with their audiences would do well to understand and master the use of at least a few of the more common platforms – Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube and Twitter. Further, since so many more adults use social media for communicating, it stands to reason that they would also seek out the same outlets for obtaining information about the risks in their lives and/or when a crisis is imminent, they will migrate to the same outlets to obtain information on what is happening and what they can do to protect themselves and their families.

The American Red Cross has performed several studies on the information-seeking behaviors of people in an emergency. Their 2009 study found that social media sites are the 4th most popular source for emergency information. Their 2010 survey found that roughly half of the respondents said they would sign up for emails and text alerts or other types of emergency information. In addition, the study found that younger people are more likely to ask for help via social media and have high expectations that agencies will respond to their requests. [12] Both of

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[8] The United States Army Online and Social Media Division. (2012) The United States Army Social Media Handbook, v. 3. Washington, DC.
[9] Gaines-Ross, L. Reputation Trends for 2013 – Now and Ahead [Blog]. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-leslie-gainesross/trends-business-2013_b_2370623.html
[10] Social Media Usage Toolkit.
[11] Smith, A., Brenner, J. (2012 May 31) Twitter Use 2012 [Technical Report]. Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org/~/media/Files/Reports/2012/PIP_Twitter_Use_2012.pdf
[12] American Red Cross (2012).

these studies provide a clear path to the use of social media by organizations to deliver their crisis communications.

In 2011, the Congressional Research Service (CRS) published a report "Social Media and Disasters: Current Uses, Future Options, and Policy Considerations"[13], indentifying two different paths for organizations to choose when dealing with social media – passive and active. Use as a passive outbound tool is the route most often chosen by emergency management organizations (until recently) and involves disseminating information and getting basic feedback via messages, wall posts and polls.

The CRS report advocates active use and listening; envisioning social media as a tool to be used to conduct emergency communications, issue warnings, solicit victim requests for assistance, establish situational awareness by monitoring users, and use uploaded images to create disasters estimates; in other words "harvesting the chatter" and putting it to good use. While not yet commonplace among some emergency managers, recent successful opportunities have led to a rethinking of strategic uses and numerous thought leaders in the field are promoting the agenda. From a blog posted on the site *Social Media 4 Emergency Management* on July 23, 2012[14]:

It is time that Emergency Managers all receive training in marketing and risk communication principles. The revolution that is occurring is the fact that we are no longer able to delegate public information to a single communications officer. We all need to understand how public information works and be confident to understand the impact of what we are trying to say at all times. When every second counts in life safety issues, being ready to navigate social communications requires us to be both social and excellent communicators.

The CRS report's author argues that social media should be considered for use by emergency managers and officials to develop situational awareness during an emergency as the real-time information it provides can help officials determine how to respond and how to deploy resources.

As with any full discussion, many organizational managers are hesitant to engage in social media for legitimate reasons and concerns. Most commonly noted is the inability to control the message. Indeed, the very foundation behind social media is the ability of anyone to engage, with limited restrictions regarding what they say. Since traditional messaging by organizations attempts to be scripted, controlled and one-way, particularly crisis communications, social media would appear on the surface to be at odds with this fundamental goal. However, social media users are adamant about the ability of these platforms to remain beyond restrictions, even as some use the platforms to spread information they know to be incorrect and/or to use it for malicious intent. And some users are simply not reasonable people or see the anonymity as a means to see how outlandish a message they can post.

[13] Lindsay, B. (2011, September 6). *Social Media and Disasters: Current Uses, Future Options, and Policy Considerations*. Congressional Research Service. Washington, DC. 7-5700.
[14] Not Dead Just out of the Box. (2012, July 25). [Blog] Retrieved from http://www.sm4em.org/2012/07/not-dead-just-out-of-the-box/

In addition to the lack of control, the lack of privacy and security of some platforms is another frequently noted concern by organizations.[15] Data collection, retention, and future use is not as tightly coordinated or controlled – the adage that something posted on the Internet is there forever is essentially true. Errors can be recalled, but are not erased.

Inaccurate messages can also be problematic with social media, given the sheer number of people disseminating information with virtually no limits. A study on the use of Twitter following the March 2011 Tohoku earthquake in Japan, found the existence of "numerous unreliable 'retweets' (RTs), where users of the service repeated inaccurate information and that this was one of the biggest information-related problems facing those involved".[16] In other cases, basic information was inaccurately reported such as the location of the disaster and the number of victims.[17]

Other common concerns include an overreliance on technology that can have functional limitations, particularly during an emergency. During natural disasters when power outages are common and can last well beyond the battery life of a typical smartphone or tablet, social media can be cut off requiring a back-up system be developed. Numerous pictures of hastily erected cell phone charging stations proliferated during the recent Superstorm Sandy in the fall of 2012.

Social Media and Crisis Communications

Despite all of the above, the enormous potential of social media use in risk and crisis communications continues to be explored and utilized by many SH&E professionals in the field. In many respects, the increasing use of social media is changing the business of risk and crisis communications in part because SH&E professionals are actively engaging in the use of it, but also because the sheer volume of messages and widespread usage makes it happen without or without them.

Commonly used risk and crisis communications definitions both share the overarching purpose of providing information to audiences so that they can be informed. However, they tend to differ beyond that in many other respects, primarily that risk communications involve engagement of the audience in the process so that a consensus regarding solutions and activities regarding the risk event can be generated or that the participation by the audience can be utilized by the organization to make decisions and establish procedures that take the audience's perspective and desires into account. The risk event being discussed is not occurring, but is being planned for and one of the key goals of the process is dialogue and engaging the audience. Crisis communications are those messages delivered when the crisis is about to occur or is already occurring. The messages are almost entirely one-way from the organization to the audience and are designed to achieve the purpose of helping the audience act in ways that provide for their immediate safety or long-term welfare.[18]

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[15] Gray (2012) and Lindsay (2011).
[16] Twitter and Natural Disasters. (2011, April 15) e! Science News. Retrieved from
http://esciencenews.com/articles/2011/04/15/twitter.and.natural.disasters
[17] Lindsay (2011)
[18] Walaski, P. (2011). *Risk and Crisis Communications: Methods and Messages*. Hoboken, NJ.

However, the current environment that makes use of social media platforms to deliver crisis messages is fundamentally changing those definitions. Gerald Baron, a 30-year veteran of public relations and crisis communications, argues that "in a time of hyper-engagement and hyper-connectedness, crisis communications are changing in their volume, urgency, and engagement levels are much higher because of intense external audience focus."[19] In other words, crisis communications are now becoming more like the traditional risk communications, which are two-way events, focusing on audience participation.

Baron says that traditional media such as newspapers and other forms of print media as well as televised newscasts that audiences passively watch without engagement continues to utilize the one-way messaging approach, but are not where many audiences are gathering to obtain news and information. He encourages the use of social media for two-way crisis communications. While he does not advocate dismissing a traditional approach entirely, he does strongly support the ability of social media to facilitate direct engagement with audiences and communicate in methods of their choosing, which is more likely to lead to productive ways of connecting during a crisis event. Baron also reminds organizations that social media is where traditional media go find out what is happening and use those outlets to "amplify to their audiences. So if you are not there and communicating at hyper-network speed, you will likely be out of the story."[20]

Using Social Media for Crisis Communications
Social media platforms work well for the delivery of crisis communications messages, despite their two-way format. It is sometimes tempting for an organization to enter social media in the midst of a crisis and believe they can do so successfully. Unfortunately, such is rarely the case, leading to more disastrous consequences. Engaging in social media for everyday crisis communications requires advance planning, a targeted approach and time.

The author assumes an organizational presence in social media, whether it is for marketing, soliciting customer opinions and reactions or for engaging employees. If none exists, the following resources are provided:

1. *Social Media Usage Toolkit***:** Practical Law Publishing Limited and Practical Law Company, Inc. This site provides a comprehensive set of documents, checklists, policies and standards that provide information and guidance on nearly every topic an organization will face.[21]
2. *The United States Army Social Media Handbook (Version 3; June 2012):* **(**available for download.[22]) Although this resources is geared directly to Army uses of social media by departments and individual enlistees, it addresses substantive issues regarding how to develop standards for us, increase security, developing a social media presences, Army branding and other topics which can easily be modified to suit an non-military operation.

[19] William, T. (2012, August 21) Interview with Crisis Communications Expert Gerald Baron. Retrieved from
    http://www.advancedreputationmanagement.com/interview-with-crisis-communications-expert-gerald-baron
[20] William (2012).
[21] Social Media Usage Toolkit.
[22] The United States Army Social Media Handbook (Version 3; June 2012)
    http://armylive.dodlive.mil/index.php/2012/06/social-media-handbook-edition-3/

3. *6 Steps to Preparing Your Business for a Social Media Crisis*: Published by Melissa Agnes, 2012.[23] Available for download.

      SH&E professionals can add value to their organization by becoming adept at understanding these and involve themselves in working with other departments in the organization such as marketing, public relations and human relations to establish the groundwork. Once that has occurred, a more targeted approach toward usage for delivering crisis communication messages can occur with SH&E professionals taking the lead among organizational departments.

      Three core principles for successful utilization of social media during a crisis include the message, the channel, and the frequency, says crisis management consultant Melissa Agnes.[24] The message includes the words that are delivered but also assumes that different messages may be needed for different audiences. Therefore, organizations need to know what channels their targeted audience is using, which requires advance research in several channels to gauge what is effective and what is not. There are numerous tools available for organization listening and monitoring of both targeted audiences as well as identifying trending messages by constituent groups. These include Crowdsourcing, Radian6, Attensity, and Visible Technologies.[25] The tools are free and many of these will work well for smaller organizations. Those with larger audiences will want to investigate fee-based ones.

      However, more fundamental than simply locating and communicating with targeted audiences is an organization's ability to establish trust and credibility with that audience. This has always been the foundation of risk or crisis communications, long before the advent of social media.[26] Baron says, "The most important thing in crisis communications is not what we say, it's what we do. Trust is based upon character, the character of the leaders which are most clearly demonstrated in what actions are being taken."[27] It follows then that trust and credibility must be achieved in social media channels as well, either because it was already in place prior to engaging via social media or because it has been developed via the social media relationship. This trust and credibility can be established through pre-crisis audience identification, finding the platforms they are using and engaging in those platforms to build relationships and rapport.

      Once an organization knows and understands their audiences and has established a relationship built on trust and credibility, the channels can be used much more effectively to communicate in a crisis. The scripting of the message needs to be crafted based upon a select audience and at times messages must be modified based upon the intended audience. Messages to

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[23] Agnes, M. 6 Steps to Preparing Your Business for a Social Media Crisis (2012) Retrieved from http://www.melissaagnes.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Special-Report-6-Step-Guide-to-Preparing-Your-Business-For-a-Social-Media-Crisis.pdf

[24] Agnes, M. (2012, July 30) How to Use Social Media to Communicate Your Message in a Crisis. [Blog] Retrieved from http://www.melissaagnes.com/how-to-use-social-media-to-communicate-your-message-in-a-crisis/

[25] O'Malley, G. (2012, April 24). Forester Rates Top 'Listening' Platforms/Vendors [Blog]. Retrieved from http://www.mediapost.com/publications/article/173189/forrester-rates-top-listening-platformsvendors.html

[26] Peters, R.G., V.T. Covello, and D.B. McCallum. (1997) "The Determinants of Trust and Credibility in Environmental Risk Communication: An Empirical Study." *Risk Analysis.* 17(1):43-54.
Sandman, P. (2005). Katrina: Hurricanes, Catastrophes, and Risk Communications. [Column]. Retrieved from http://www.petersandman.com/col/katrina.htm.
Walaski; pp 29-30. Peters, et al on page 39, and Sandman, 2005 on page 40

[27] William. (2012).

the internal workforce about a chemical spill might be different than those delivered to vendors or the immediate community of businesses or residences.

This need for "specialization" of messages is one of the benefits of using social media. Because the messages tend to be shorter, massaging the core message to suit a variety of channels is easier and allows for the delivery of messages that are unique to the audiences who frequent those channels. Different audiences have different expectations, in terms of both content and frequency and if an organization understands these expectations in advance and is prepared to meet them, the messages not only provide information to the audience but also reinforce the positive reputation.

Four of the most common channels include those listed below. It should be noted that all of them, with the exception of You Tube, work best with advance engagement and development of "followers" (Twitter) or "likes" (Facebook):

1. Twitter – If your crisis event is being followed by a specific hashtag (prefaced by the pound sign - #), you will want to monitor it closely to see what is being said and respond regularly to applicable posts. In addition, a follower who sends you a direct message (DM) or mentions you (through the use of the at sign - @) expects direct replies. Fortunately by applying the relevant hashtag to your responses, those following the crisis will also see it, which will not only give them the same information, but also provide answers to similar questions. It also shows the organization's ongoing engagement with the audience (followers).
2. YouTube – This community can be highly critical in its comments, but more often than not, users don't read the comments in great depth prior to sharing the video with their network. Of the various social media platforms, YouTube is not known for its two-way interaction, but its usage in a crisis is growing as it allows for posting of critical press conference and other informational briefings or messages from critical organizational personnel.
3. Facebook Fan Pages – Expectations of fan page users are high with regard to responding to their comments quickly. This will require rapid and personal responses and frequent updates.
4. Facebook Groups – This platform is more of a forum with an interaction between members rather than between a "fan" and the organization. Still it requires monitoring, responding and reacting on a regular basis.

Agnes recommends a few guidelines for message frequency, but organizations should understand that the hyperactivity of social media has fundamentally changed the idea that a three or even four times per day press briefing is sufficient at the height of a crisis. Choosing an interval relative to the phase of the crisis makes sense, but at its height, messages every 15-20 minutes are the essential minimum. Messages that indicate there is "no new information" to be shared are part of the frequency they keep followers monitoring the situation through your organization's channels and, more importantly, not those of another organization. In traditional media relations, responding to a request for information with "no comment" is considered to be a serious error; similarly allowing too long a period of time to elapse between social media messages frustrates the audience or even drives them to another information source.

Developing a Social Media Policy

The development and implementation of a Social Media Policy is an area where many organizations are currently struggling, in part because they are unsure of what can and cannot be

in such a policy, but also because the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) has been actively engaged in ruling on cases brought to their attention. However, organizations should not ignore the need to establish basic guidelines for employees who engage in social media outside of their direct roles in crisis messaging and should seek to determine the current thinking on the content of such policies, adapting and revising where necessary.

As noted above, many organizations are wary of developing a Social Media policy. In a recent survey conducted by BLR over 40% of the respondents indicated that developing a Social Media Policy posed the biggest challenge for their organizations; the next closest response was a cell phone/distracted driving policy coming in at slightly over 20%.[28] Also troubling for many organizations are questions concerning just what types of behavior can be legally addressed in such policies without affecting an employee's free speech rights and the open forum nature of most social media platforms.

While the NLRB will continue to establish case law and will continue to set parameters that answer these questions over time, they have recently weighed in regarding specific policies they deem to be overly restrictive and broad, such as a 2010 case involved an employee who posted disparaging remarks about a supervisor on her Facebook page.[29] The company's social media policy prohibited employees from making defamatory remarks about the company, their supervisor, coworkers or competitors and the posts were used as the basis for the employee's termination. The NLRB determined that the employer violated Section 7 of the National Labor Rights Act, which protects activity by an employee that involves discussion of working conditions; in this case the supervisor.[30] In recent months, the NLRB has published its ruling on no less than 14 separate cases; most of which have gone against an employer's written policy and the enforcement of it.

Despite the difficulties of crafting such a policy, numerous organizations are opting to create some guidelines and restrictions on social media usage. For the 2012 Olympic Summer Games held in London, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) distributed a Social Media handbook to all athletes, stipulating what athletes could share electronically. Some of the mandates included a prohibition against posting videos of events or from the Olympic Village. They were also prohibited from mentioning their corporate sponsorships or using the Olympic symbol of five interlocking rings.[31]

Baron's position is that changes to risk and crisis communications concepts due to the influence of social media have also impacted how Social Media Policies can be crafted. An organization that attempts to mandate that the media receive its information from only one spokesperson is not likely to be successful – reporters will interview anyone who will talk, including the organization's employees. Restrictive Social Media Policies can tempt employees to

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[28] What policy is the biggest challenge? Social media, according to survey. (2012, August 10). [News Report] BLR - HR and Employment News.

[29] Acting General Counsel releases report on social media cases. (2011, August 18) [Government news report]. Retrieved from http://www.nlrb.gov/news/acting-general-counsel-releases-report-social-media-cases.

[30] Would Your Social Media Policies Pass NLRB Scrutiny? (2012, July 30) [News Report] BLR - HR and Employment News. Retrieved from http://hr.blr.com/HR-news/Unions/National-Labor-Relations-Act-NLRA/zn-Would-Your-Social-Media-Policies-Pass-NLRB-Scru/

[31] Smith, E. (2012, July 2) From triumph to scandal: Olympians in the social media spotlight. [News Report]. Retrieved from http://www.cnn.com/2012/07/02/living/olympics-scandal-twitter-photos/index.html

exert their own control over their employer by speaking negatively. Baron argues that better results are achieved by reminding employees that anything that negatively impacts the company affects their own self-interest. He also argues that having good employee relations at the start is ultimately the best defense.[32]

Templates and broad guidelines are available outlining Social Media Policy content and each organization should assure that its policy is customized; however, numerous points appear fairly consistently among those who recommended content[33]:

- Assure that the policy does not interfere with an employee's ability to utilize various social media platforms when off-duty.
- Request that employees use common sense, good judgment and personal responsibility when posting on social media while off-duty.
- Indicate that the company assumes employees are trusted to exercise personal responsibility while participating in online activities if permitted while on-duty.
- Require that any permitted on-duty usage be done in such a way that does not interfere with performance of work duties. The policy should also stipulate that on-duty use be directly related to work, approved by their manager and be monitored.
- Prohibit the sharing of privileged or confidential information or speculating about the company's future activities if publically held.
- Ban the use of company trademarks and copyrights on a personal website or social media platform.
- Require that disclosures accompany any employee who uses personal sites to identify themselves as an employee of the company, indicating that any positions are personal and not the views of the company.

Some Recent Lessons Learned
Nearly every day opportunities for social media engagement during a crisis occur. Some of these events are large enough or serious enough to warrant national media coverage. Under these watchful eyes, valuable lesson have been learned from errors and examples of effective social media usage abound. Two recent events are discussed here; one demonstrating the detriments of an organization unprepared to engage their audience via social media and one who "got it".

Penn State University and the Jerry Sandusky Scandal[34]
Penn State University's desire to control the messaging during this crisis was paramount, from the first allegations that dated as far back as 2002 to the major news story that broke on November 4, 2011 when Sandusky was indicted by the Grand Jury. At that time Penn State Football had an intern named Kelly Burns. Prior to the scandal, from 2009 until 2012, she had been instrumental in developing the Penn State Football Facebook page, acquiring over 350,000 "likes" along with its Twitter feed @PennStateFball, to which she personally responded.

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[32] William (2012).
[33] BLR (2012, August 12)
 Nelson, A. (2102, August 21) What to leave out of your social media policy [Blog] Retrieved from
    http://www.radian6.com/blog/2012/08/what-to-leave-out-of-your-social-media-policy/

Ms. Burns was told to remove Sandusky's photo from the Facebook page in the summer of 2011. After the indictment she, along with anyone in the University system, was prohibited from posting anything about the scandal. Five days later, she was permitted to post general information about football. However, as of this writing, nothing about the scandal and its enormous impact has ever been posted on Penn State social media by the University.[34] (Obviously, fans were able to indicate their thoughts on existing posts, though, like many organizations, they were moderated and removed if deemed inappropriate or rude.)

The strategy was a failure says Burns: "I think in our day and age of social media, that silence was not the right response. Keeping information private is not the way to go when people are talking 24x7 on social media and need reassurance…I think it is crucial for organizations to have crisis management plans with a social media component."[35] (As an anecdotal aside, this writer is good friends with several professors and other University staff whose children attend Penn State. When the story broke and the students were engaging in supportive actions for former coach Joe Paterno along with overall protests about its impact on their college lives, many outsiders saw their actions as condoning the abuse and how it was handled, along with being typical of young, irresponsible college students. However, the comment heard most often from this writer's friends was that the students were in the dark about what had really happened and were reacting on an emotional basis in part, based upon lack of information, owing in part to their reliance on social media to get their news, rather than typical print outlets.)

Similar criticisms have been leveled by observers of social media regarding handling of the scandal by the University. First, silence (also known as "no comment") rarely works. It makes an organization appear guilty or actively covering up unpleasant facts. It didn't work in the pre-social media world and it doesn't work now. Silence has always added fuel to the fire; social media views it in the same light. Second, the adage failing to plan is planning to *fail is true for crisis communications and as importantly for social media usage during a* crisis. Other points made by another commenter[36] include an acknowledgement that it took a lot of courage for University officials to keep their Facebook pages open, particularly when the news is not positive and the comments were derisive, even though it didn't sufficiently counteract the mistake of not getting in front of the message. And finally, "If information is transparent, honest and empathetic, sentiment will eventually sway in favor of an organization".[37]

Initial posts deriding the entire University system and focusing on the officials who controlled the situation from the beginning have become less common, but the damage to Penn State's reputation will linger for many years to come, in areas well outside of football. Had the University been more transparent and empathetic at the beginning, perhaps the public's ability to separate the good of the University from those who acted inappropriately and probably illegally would have improved.

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[34] Meerman Scott, D. (2012, June 23) Penn State University Football: Social media and crisis management lessons. [Blog]. Retrieved from http://www.webinknow.com/2012/06/penn-state-university-football-social-media-and-crisis-management-lessons-learned.html

[35] Meerman Scott (2012).

[36] Syme, C. (2011, November 22). Using Social Media in Crisis: A Study From Penn State. [Blog]. Retrieved from http://cksyme.org/penn-state-social-media-in-crisis.

[37] Syme (2011).

The Lower North Fork Fire and Jefferson County's Response
On March 26, 2012 the Lower North Fork Fire broke out in Jefferson County, Colorado, about 15 miles west of Denver on the front range of the Rocky Mountains. Spring wildfires are not unusual in this part of the country, but what was unusual about this one was how the Jefferson County emergency managers integrated social media into their communications efforts. Fortunately, the County has previously developed a comprehensive public information campaign that relied heavily on social media and had begun to disseminate non-emergency information as a way of developing followers. By the time the fire started, the necessary channels were up and running, including an emergency response blog and a Twitter account with 400 followers. (By the time the crisis was over, it had grown to 1,800.) In addition, collaboration with other local online communities had already begun including Pinecam.com and 285bound.com.

Eight days after the firs began, 130 posts had been published in the JCSO emergency blog (www.jeffcosheriff1.blogspot.com), over 450 interactive Tweets were sent from their JSCO Twitter account (@JeffcoSheriffCo), and Google maps was used extensively to alert the public to the current hot spots and fire fighting efforts. In addition, many media outlets linked directly to the emergency blog and interactive Google map. Statistical tracking tools were also already in place so that post-incident data could be reviewed. Jefferson County was able to verify 450,000 visits to the status blog, with more than 300,000 reposts as well as over 2.5 million views of the interactive Google map. In addition the Tweets were estimated to have been viewed hundreds of thousands of times.

Positive feedback was also directed to the Twitter account and to the Google Gmail account by local residents, business, and online communities as well as observers throughout the United States. Below are some selected comments:[38]

- We do not own a TV. We both work an hour away from Conifer. We could see the fire from our house along Foxton Road on Monday. We depend 90% on social media for these types of emergencies.
- This blog has been tremendous! Both my husband and I live in Denver and having to leave every day has been stressful. Having this constant source to check on has kept us calm and in touch.
- I finally got myself a Twitter account and started following your feed just because of this fire.
- I have to say I have never seen such effective communication with the public in Jefferson County as I did with this fire, thanks to your use of Twitter and the Jeffco Sheriff's blog. I even saw some local media put up your Twitter feed in their stories.

The Path Forward with Social Media

SH&E professionals who are new to social media but realize they need to become more engaged, should start with just one platform. Facebook is likely to be the simplest for those readers who have not yet tried anything. If, like millions of users, a Facebook profile, groups, and "liked" pages are already in place, LinkedIn might be the next place to engage. Many professionals have unused LinkedIn profiles because they never knew how to use the site. Engaging in discussion groups can help broaden their understanding of the power of online connections. Those who feel

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[38] Lower North Fork Fire Integrated Social Media & Public Information Outreach Strategy Executive Summary. (n.d.). [Google docs]. Retrieved from https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B_3vHjXvTmbCdWFfNnpfdUVCWGM/edit?pli=1

a basic comfort level with social media should migrate to Twitter to practice online collaboration. While Twitter requires a bit of a learning curve, many resources exist to provide a basic entry. Smarta's Twitter eBook is a great resource to learn how to Tweet and follow Twitterverse etiquette.[39]

Once proficiency with several platforms is achieved, SH&E professionals can help move their organizations forward in understanding the importance of participating in social media (or joining the organization's current efforts) as a way to share knowledge and add value. From there, engaging internal and external audiences in a variety of opportunities, including risk and crisis communications, brings it all full circle. In addition, SH&E professionals can utilize their social media knowledge and expertise to assure their organizations policy and procedural frameworks are in place and functional, including the development of Social Media Policies and inclusion of a Social Media component into their Crisis Communications Plans.

While SH&E professionals have kept protection of people, property and the environment at the forefront of our efforts, we have not shied away from realizing that we need to try different strategies and techniques to achieve these goals. Social media represents nothing more than another method to fine tune our efforts and embracing it will expand our abilities and opportunities to engage our audiences to achieve our fundamental goals.

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