A Look into the Future of Crisis Messaging .
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As technology rapidly advances, companies should embrace live-streaming in their next crisis statement.

Figure 1: Live Stream Photograph (Zanger 2016)

Have you ever thought your crisis communication tactics might be outdated and ineffective? Does your crisis communication plan account for the latest technological advancements and the change in your stakeholders' news consumption habits? This article introduces you to the idea of having your next crisis statement live-streamed in order to increase not only your transparency, but also your chances to be in control of the narrative throughout the entire crisis communication process.

Engaging your stakeholders in participatory dialogues via Periscope or Meerkat during emergencies can prove beneficial, especially because the majority of us are now more likely to watch a video online than read an article. Therefore, UK organisations should adapt their crisis communication to account for the changes in our news consumption and trends emerging on social media.

The article reviews the social-mediated crisis communication (SMCC) model to help map out a strategy for live-streaming crisis messages. The emerging research concerned with the SMCC model suggests that information form is as important as the actual message, which changes the way PR professionals should approach their strategies.

The model proposes reaching out to companies' influential social media creators first as they have the ability to impact the remaining two groups: social media followers and social media inactives. Since Periscope and Meerkat have the potential to become game changers for emergency management, it is crucial for each organisation to weigh the benefits against the risks. Live-streaming crisis messages can help you come across as authentic, human, and transparent, but careful planning, and preliminary checks, must be carried out first. Having reviewed further implications for PR professionals, the article concludes with a checklist designed to assist your organisation in incorporating live-streaming in your next crisis communication plan.

TWO BIG PLAYERS: PERISCOPE AND MEERKAT

The idea of putting a video up on social media is as outdated as creating a MySpace account. However, the latest technological advancements have introduced consumers, and brands, to a completely new world of audio-visual content. Up until a year ago, "Meerkat was just a small mammal associated with insurance, and a periscope was something one would expect to find on a submarine" (Abernethy 2015).. Today, Meerkat (2016) and its rival Periscope (2016) are associated with the biggest live-streaming video applications (Cellan-Jones 2015), and they have the potential to change the way companies communicate with their stakeholders, even in times of crises. "It may sound crazy, but we wanted to build the closest thing to teleportation" (Periscope 2016).

Whilst teleportation devices can still only be seen in *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* episodes, Periscope and Meerkat allow their users to have a "sneak peek" of Al Roker's *Today Show*, or a music concert on the other side of the continent. There are minor differences between these two applications. If you, or your client, would like to review the last broadcast before updating your customers on the crisis resolution, choose Periscope. It saves the videos for up to 24 hours (Williams 2015). However, if you wish to schedule your live-stream a day before it starts, create an account with Meerkat (Johnson 2015); it might prove helpful if you promised to get back to your stakeholders at a certain time. By scheduling your broadcast, and most importantly, speaking directly to the customers, your brand will seem more human and trustworthy (Fichet et al. 2016).

SOCIAL MEDIA AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Social media have had noticeable influence on Public Relations (PR) and crisis communication practice (Liu and Fraustino 2014; Fuehrer and Smith 2016). They have been praised by many scholars, and practitioners, for their capacity to enable more symmetrical, two-way communication between brands and their publics (Coombs and Holladay 2015). Organisations have used Twitter or Facebook in the past to establish positive reputation, and stakeholder relationships, before crises, as well as participatory dialogue during emergencies (Veil et al. 2011; Ulmer et al. 2015). In only a few years, social media sites became primary go-to places for customers, investors, and the media, to read the latest updates on their favourite brands (Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith 2008). A recent study by Ofcom (2015) shows that the consumption of news across any online platform has seen a large increase since 2005, from 25% to 42%. In fact, less than half of people aged 16-34 continue to read news via traditional media channels, such as TV or newspapers, during their typical week (Mintel 2016). Nowadays, people are 75% more likely to watch a video than read an article (Forrester 2015 cited by Panopto 2015). This means UK organisations should engage in a dialogue with their stakeholders using various online platforms, particularly live-streaming video applications. If truth be told, the question is *how*, not *if*, you should use them.

SOCIAL-MEDIATED CRISIS COMMUNICATION MODEL

In order to gain a better understanding of how companies and consumers should use social media to communicate in the event of a crisis situation, it is worth having a closer look at the social-mediated crisis communication (SMCC) model presented in Figure 2 (Jin et al. 2011; Austin et al. 2012).
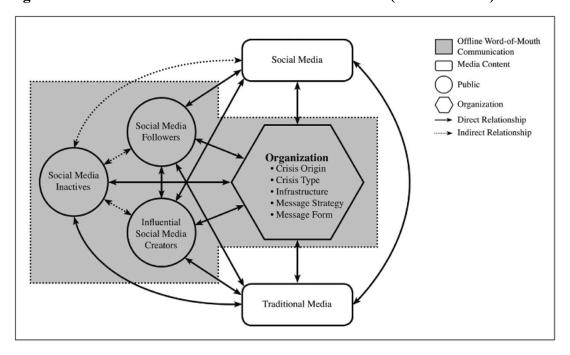
Figure 2: Social-mediated crisis communications model (Jin et al. 2011)

The model, firstly proposed by Jin and Liu (2010), served as a roadmap for influencing bloggers in crisis communication messaging. However, some scholars (Briones et al. 2011) have quickly recognised its wide areas of application and transferability to all social media platforms. Emerging research concerned with the SMCC model suggests that information form might be as important as the actual crisis response message (Jin and Liu 2010; Schultz et al. 2011). This changes the way PR professionals, and crisis communications scholars, should approach their strategies, particularly after Coombs and Holladay's (2009) long-established views that media type has minimal effect on publics' evaluation of crisis response strategies. Despite the research lacking wider scientific evidence, organisations should start paying closer attention to the media channels they use to distribute crisis statements (Snoeijers et al. 2014). Live-streaming video applications are, therefore, worth considering as a way of increasing company's transparency. Human face can have greater effects on crisis resolution than a generic Facebook post or a pre-written tweet (Freberg et al. 2011; Turk et al. 2012).

The second issue highlighted by the SMCC model is concerned with three types of publics who produce, and consume, information before, during, and after crises: influential social media creators, social media followers, and social media inactives (Jin et al. 2011; Austin et al. 2012). Considering the direct and indirect relationship between those groups, companies would benefit the most from identifying, and reaching out to, their influential social media creators first, as they have the ability to impact the remaining two groups. A good example could be Target, which promoted their live event with Gwen Stefani using Periscope, and Facebook Live, spreading the word across all social media influencers (Kuchler and Bond 2016). Having done the research, Target recognised and distinguished their key internal and external publics, and so should you in your crisis communication plan (Fearn-Banks 2002; Seeger 2007).

As we live in the digital era (Duhe 2007), you cannot afford not to include your most influential Twitter, Facebook, and blog, followers in the press list. It will save you a substantial amount of time - true gold during crises. When identifying your key publics, you should examine the time they are most likely to be active on social media; you can then schedule your live broadcast accordingly, making sure your crisis message reaches affected publics.

BENEFITS AND RISKS OF LIVE-STREAMING CRISIS MESSAGES

Live streaming services are undoubtedly a valuable form of audio-visual content, especially when you want to make the message public quickly, and without a lot of production behind the broadcast (Renfrow 2015). Periscope or Meerkat have the potential to become game changers for emergency management. By taking charge of your own content, and skipping intermediaries, companies can reduce both the time it takes to reach the public and the risk of misinterpretation or miscommunication (Fichet et al. 2016). For brands which used live-streaming in recent months, the appeal boiled down to two buzzwords "authentic" and "transparent" - key attributes to come across with in a crisis statement (Kuchler and Bond 2016). Most importantly, a live-streamed broadcast with running questions and comments could reassure your customers that you are in control of the situation (Holmes 2015).

However, broadcasting live comes with the risk of the unknown (Mehta 2015). Whether it will be one of your customers using inappropriate language, or the video freezing when 400 followers log in, the risk is worth taking. Of course, if something happens live, there is neither time, nor the chance to approve or edit it. Therefore, before deciding to live-stream a crisis message, a significant amount of planning, and preliminary checks, are advisable (Renfrow 2015). Ofcom, UK communications regulator, is currently looking into whether a lighter approach towards broadcasting regulations could be introduced, given recent advancements in video technology (Thomas 2015). At the moment, however, some of the legal concerns still have to be addressed prior to the broadcast, such as copyright and trademark issues (Sloane 2015). By choosing a neutral location (rather than filming out in the real world), you can avoid the potential legal pitfalls.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PR PRACTITIONERS

Positioning yourself, and your client, as early adopters of live-streaming applications in crises brings similar implications for PR practitioners as when they first embraced Snapchat and Twitter. Good PR practice begins with identifying SMART objectives for your client's communication (Lawlor and Hornyak 2012; Doran 1981 cited by Haughey 2013). Some of your crisis communications goals might include reducing the impact of the crisis on those affected, or keeping the organisation's image intact. When using live-streaming services your primary objective could be to establish contact with the stakeholders quickly and credibly (Ulmer et al. 2015). Before broadcasting live, PR professionals should conduct an online audit, and define benchmarks, which would make the measurement process more reliable and clear. Any social media measurement approach must follow the updated Barcelona Principles (2015), and attempt to reflect

the reality of audience interaction, as well as its impact on previously defined SMART goals (Chartered Institute of Public Relations 2013). Since live-streaming is a relatively new phenomenon, there has not been any academic research done yet on what measurement metrics should be taken into consideration. Therefore, you might want to rely on, even create, best practices in the industry. If you decide to schedule your crisis update, you can compare the engagement of the tweet informing your public about the live broadcast with the engagement during the actual live video. The average amount of minutes watched per stream, and peak and average number of concurrent streams, will capture the most basic data for further analysis (Lau ca. 2015). Meerkat offers various ways of interacting with the content; you can comment, re-stream or "heart" the broadcast (Dougherty 2015). The measurement tools, which you have become proficient in by now, will provide you with a sufficient amount of data to draw conclusions regarding the success of your live-streaming tactic.

Further implications for PR professionals are related to the long-established relationships with the journalists. By using live-streaming applications, you gain more experience as a content creator, which puts journalism as a profession in the corner. In fact, the American Society of News Editors found its first double-digit decline in newsroom count since the Great Recession of seven years ago (Doctor 2015). However, if you identify the right journalists as your key social media influencers, your crisis message will reach their social media followers, and the social media inactives, mentioned in the SMCC model. The PR-journalist relationship should be now a matter of professional collaboration to account for living in the new age (Lewis 2016). At the end of the day, you share similar goals, and if you can provide audio-visual content to your tier one press, it is a win-win situation for your client, and your media.

Speaking of journalists, it is improbable for them to be physically present during your client's live broadcast on Periscope. It does not mean you can skip the organisation of thorough media trainings for your client. Although your CEO will not get as "starstruck" as some did by the BBC reporters' questions in the past, the amount, and quality, of customers' comments might be overwhelming, and lead to yet another crisis disaster. Prepare for every possible scenario.

CONCLUDING WITH A LIVE-STREAMING STRATEGY

Having reviewed the pros and cons of using live-streaming video applications when delivering crisis messages, it could be beneficial to do a quick checklist, and shift your focus towards the strategic part of social media in crisis communication.

The strategy is very much dependent on the type of crisis, nature of the business, and corporate reputation before the crisis incident (Booth 1993; Coombs 1999). You are the best judge on whether to incorporate live-streaming in your crisis communication plans, or leave it for others to clear the path. Nevertheless, here are some key takeaways:

1. **Plan ahead.** Research your influential social media creators, their habits, and best times to live-stream. Add a few minutes extra to your crisis simulation exercises to go through the worst possible scenarios on Meerkat and Periscope.

2. **Establish SMART goals** for your crisis communication.

3. **Inform** people you will be live-streaming. Whether it is in 15 minutes whilst you consult your legal team, or in 4 hours when the investigation progresses, tweet that you are going to be live. People will make themselves available to watch your broadcast.

4. **Integrate** live-streaming with your traditional methods of communication in crises. Don't give up on drafting proactive statements and disseminating them across your key publications; journalists will keep ringing, and they will want your comment no matter what.

5. Always **check the Internet connection** before going live. Always. Buy a tripod so that your CEO's shaking hands do not affect the quality of the video, and the importance of the message. It's obvious, but very easy to forget.

6. **Focus on your key messages.** Inform your audience about the 5Ws (what, where, when, who, why) in a couple of minutes. The average length of a single Internet video watched is 2 minutes 7 seconds (Delgado 2015). Keep it short, but at the same time, address some of the comments coming through during the live-stream.

7. **Be transparent.** The safety of your stakeholders is equally important during a natural disaster as it is in a data breach crisis. Always put your customers first.

8. Finally, **measure the outcomes and the outputs.** The measurement metrics worth looking at include the average amount of minutes watched per stream, peak and average number of concurrent streams, website traffic, sentiment, and engagement.

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