SOCIAL MEDIA AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION:
SUPPORTING BEST PRACTICE ON UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES

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A DISSERTATION

in

Higher Education Management

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Education

2016

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Matthew J. Patashnick
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation in memory of my cousin and friend, Kelly Devine, 1979 - 2016. Kelly was a wonderful person, a kind sister, daughter, granddaughter, cousin, niece, friend, coach, and teacher. Kelly never really understood social media but that didn’t stop her from trying. On December 25, 2007, I helped her to create a Facebook account and have been happily on standby for the last 9 years answering her questions and providing tech support. Her willingness to be open to it and to use it to connect with family and friends is the heart of my research question and recommendations. I miss you and will always love you. @kkdevi625 #RIP #dreammachine #dicaprio #neverletgo
I offer my love and appreciation to all who supported, cheered, motivated, pushed, inspired, and tolerated me during this process. The act of researching and writing a dissertation is often viewed as a solitary one. My experience could not be more different. I thank my committee for their guidance and words of wisdom. Mary-Linda Armacost, my chair, has left an indelible mark on my brain and in my heart and words cannot begin to describe how appreciative I am for having the opportunity to work with such a talented woman. Eric Kaplan, as a member of my committee, but also as program director, took a chance on me and led me on a journey that has been the most rewarding pursuit of my life. Peter Konwerski, who I have known since my freshman year of college, has taught me in so much at such disparate points in my life, and I am grateful to him for serving at the bookends of my higher education learning.

My cohort mates in the Fearless 14 are simply amazing. Never in my life, and never again in my life, will I have the opportunity to be surrounded by such a kind, intelligent, and stimulating group of people. You have made me a better researcher, scholar, practitioner, friend, and human being. Though we will not be spending time together with the same intensity, I will keep a piece of you all with me. I am fearless because we were fearless.

I would also like to thank and appreciate the faculty and staff members at Penn GSE and in the Higher Education Division. Every person that taught or provided service is demonstrative of an educational community that cares. And then there is Ginger Stull. Ginger’s hugs were quite literally the glue that held me and us together.
I want to acknowledge my colleagues at Columbia University for their support of this experience. I am excited to be fully present again and contribute meaning to this amazing institution.

I have been a bad friend to many over the past couple of years and I look forward to reconnecting and reclaiming a bit of my social life! I cannot begin to thank Rick Joers and Joe Plower enough for being there when I needed them. I also could not have done this without Melissa Tihinen and Michael Klein, who checked in when I wanted to check out. And everyone else – I’m back.

I could not have possibly imagined completing this journey without my family, Ellen, Michael, Sara, Andrew, and Brooke. Thank you pretending to be interested when I talked about my research and papers and for cheering me on. And Sam. Who pushed me to apply. Who knew when to ask questions and when to leave me alone. Thank you. I love you.
ABSTRACT

SOCIAL MEDIA AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION:
SUPPORTING BEST PRACTICE ON UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES

Matthew J. Patashnick
Mary-Linda Armacost

Institutions of higher education across the United States are experiencing a variety of imperatives to more effectively manage the myriad crisis situations impacting their people and campuses. A crisis is an unexpected or unanticipated event that disrupts and threatens an organization (Zdziarski, et al., 2007), and it can originate from both human and natural causes. Social media has emerged as a powerful tool in the management of campus crisis. Defined as communication tools that bring together myriad discourses and people, social media can also be thought of as a broad term “that is used to refer to a new era of Web-engineered applications that are built around user-generated or user-manipulated content” (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010).

Social media has challenged university crisis communicators because of its generational divide, its speed and viral nature, concerns about reliability, and lack of human and technological resources to fully realize its potential as a tool for crisis management. However, social media has become an instrumental activity of communication, used by a growing number of students, parents, faculty members, and administrators, many of whom expect social media activity during times of crisis.
The primary purpose of this study was the exploration of social media utility as a crisis communication practice on three selected university campuses. The overarching research question for this study was “How and what social media technologies are selected, planned for, implemented, and monitored in crisis management in selected universities?” This study examines how these institutions used social media during crises, pinpoints the emergent themes, analyzes the engagement between the selected universities and their social media audience, and explores the operational challenges and opportunities of social media during campus crisis.

The findings of this study include the documentation of institutional practices that contribute to successful social media crisis communication integration. These elements ultimately coalesce into the identification of a series of best practices that can help inform the field and contribute to the establishment of best practices for social media use during campus crisis situations.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

On April 16, 2007, 32 members of the Virginia Tech campus community were killed and 17 others were wounded in what was to become the deadliest shooting incident on a college campus in history. In October of 2012, Hurricane Sandy slammed into the East Coast’s I-95 corridor, causing $68 billion worth of damage and temporarily shuttering colleges and universities in its path. In each of these instances, communication between the institutions and their communities came under intense scrutiny. The unresolved concerns resulted in litigation and reputational damage and in the establishment of new and better crisis and communication practices designed to minimize risk and harm. Many institutions are now better prepared to manage future concerns as a direct result of these and other crisis situations. As the prominence of social media grows, so too does the imperative for colleges and universities to identify best practices and to engage in the use of social media strategies when implementing crisis management protocols.

Colleges and universities in the United States are complex organizations of varying sizes, locations, institutional types, populations, physicality, infrastructure, environment, and resources. Comprised of an intergenerational fellowship of students, faculty, staff, alumni, community members, and visitors, higher education communities are inherently humanistic. As human enterprises, colleges and universities are susceptible to myriad crisis situations that impact the normal operations of the institution. Some crises are human-made, causing harm in intentional or accidental ways. Other crisis situations are the result of environmental or climatological factors. Crises that
impact these institutions can occur on-campus, in close proximity, or removed from campus.

Conceptually, a crisis is an unexpected or unanticipated event that disrupts and threatens an organization. Its timeframe is limited and carries the potential for a highly undesirable outcome (Zdziarksi, Dunkel, & Rollo, 2007). The manner in which colleges and universities respond to crisis situations is paramount, for it has implications on reputation, fiscal affairs, fundraising potential, legal matters, and external relations. There are often elaborate plans designed to leverage the resources of the institution to educate, protect, respond, and restore normalcy should a crisis arise (Zdziarski, et al., 2007). One of the most important components of crisis management planning and response involves communication to, and with, constituents. The rise in prominence of social media as a vehicle for communications has changed the frequency, pace, tenor, and delivery of crisis communication on college and university campuses (Mitroff, Diamond, & Aplaslan, 2006).

Social media is a broad-based term that encompasses a variety of modes and methods of communication practices. I am using several definitions of social media. Broadly, the concept of social media “embraces blogs, micro-blogs, social book-marking social networking, forums, collaborative creation of documents (via wikis) and the sharing of audio, photographic and video files” (Alexander, 2013). It is characterized by interactive communication, in which message content is exchanged between individuals, audiences, organizations, and sectors of the general public (Alexander, 2013). Social media can also be defined through use of online behaviors “that enable people to share content, opinions, experiences, insights, and media themselves” (Lariscy, et al., 2009).
Research Focus and Purpose

There has been an increasing amount of media attention on college and university responses to crisis. There are many articles in *Inside Higher Ed* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, as well as in major periodicals concerning the frequency and impact of crisis situations on campuses. Natural disasters, violence, and campus sexual assaults can call to question the very integrity of the institution and its administrators and can rise to crisis proportion. Colleges and universities must be proactive, not only in their response to crisis situations, but also with their communicative behaviors and practices related to campus disruptions. The advance of social media technology has altered the crisis landscape.

Students, in particular, spend a significant amount of time each day in the virtual and digital college environments that complement the physical and spatial campus boundaries. Numerous studies, including those by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles and the Pew Research Foundation, suggest that the development of digital identities and the maintenance of online personas is a key concern for the modern college student. Students look to social media and its associated engagement for various purposes including community building and information sharing. Content created by colleges and universities during times of crisis must take into account the promulgation and impact of social media to reach student stakeholders.

Colleges and universities are complex organizations with a large physical and virtual community, consisting of students, faculty, staff, alumni, parents, visitors, and other legal or affinity-based stakeholders. During times of crisis, it is imperative for the
institution to act to minimize risk to the people and physicality of the campus. The traditional modes of communication during a crisis on most college and university campuses involve various wireless communications. That assumes that most stakeholders monitor either their institutional email account or have provided their mobile phone number in hopes of receiving brief texts. In either case, most institutional crisis communication redirects the audience to a stable URL website on which updated information, plans, or directives are housed.

However, this technology is outdated, stemming largely from the 1990s and early years of the new millennium. Students spend less time in front of a computer and more time in front of a mobile device. There exists a variety of social media “apps” on which a significant amount of time is spent communicating. This is the future of crisis communication. It is a virtual space in which colleges and universities must consider investing time, resources, and content. Social media plays a pivotal role in recruitment and community building; it is as a natural extension of this that crisis communication exists.

This study was conducted to better understand and improve the utility of social media in crisis management. The major research objective was to understand how and what social media technologies are selected, planned for, implemented, and monitored in crisis management in selected universities. With this objective in mind, the major research question around which this study was framed is, “In what ways and with what results is social media used in the management of crisis situations”? By answering this question, I seek to provide practical guidance to college and university administrators
tasked with crisis management responsibilities to inform best practices for social media communication.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to ground the use of social media within crisis management on college and university campuses. The review commences with definitions of both crisis and social media. The notion of crisis management as a management and operation imperative is then defined, focused on the needs of institutions of higher education and their unique physical demands and populations. The review concludes with the art and science of crisis communication and the unique interplay of social media. As a growing and primary communications tool used to reach mass audiences with expediency, social media may sometimes sacrifice accuracy. This tension should not limit or preclude institutions from the implementation of crisis communications through social media. Rather, it is an institutional challenge to understand the intent and mechanics of social media and to adapt existing or adopt new practices that align with the realities of new technology. This literature review offers a theoretical perspective of this reality.

To establish a common language and to provide context for the dynamic, iterative, and evolving world of social media, this literature review is framed and organized by several key concepts.

Crisis

While there is general consensus and agreement about the concept of a crisis, there exists no single definition. A crisis is best understood through its impacts. It is an unexpected or unanticipated event that disrupts and threatens an organization (Zdziarski, et al., 2007). Crisis situations have the potential to damage normal organizational
functions, result in physical or mental injury, damage property, negatively impact finances, and harm the reputation and public standing of the impacted institution. A crisis is an incident that is high-impact and “characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly” (Pearson & Clair, 1998). Crisis situations can have foci in natural or human-made origins. However, since events like “floods, earthquakes, and other so-called ‘natural’ disaster agents have social consequences,” all disasters are inherently human as they impact people and the organizations they inhabit (Quarentelli, 1999). Often a natural crisis can trigger a series of resultant human-made concerns, stemming from the locus of origination but manifesting in a vastly different manner (Wang & Hutchins, 2010). A crisis does not exist in isolation, but is often the end result of a long chain of interconnected events (Mitroff, et al., 2006). Not all incidents that have the capacity to cause injury or damage are crisis situations. Rather, a crisis becomes a crisis when the impacted individuals, community, or organization lacks the resources and coping mechanisms to efficiently recover (Myer, et al., 2011).

In spite of its origins, an incident only becomes a crisis when a hazardous situation intersects with human systems and threatens that which is valued, including the health and welfare of people, physical infrastructure, brand and reputation, and financial holdings (De Smet, et al., 2012). The need to protect that which is valued requires prompt action, strategic and thoughtful decision-making (with a degree of uncertainty of outcome) to manage and mitigate a crisis situation (Kouzmin, 2008). While a crisis cannot always be predicted, all crises must be managed. The concept of crisis
management, as an area of academic inquiry and as a professionalized organizational skill, is the response to events that threaten harm.

**Social Media**

Characterized by communication tools that bring together myriad discourses and people, social media can also be thought of as a broad term “that is used to refer to a new era of Web-engineered applications that are built around user-generated or user-manipulated content” (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010). This type of media is often viewed as a more engaged method of interactivity, with greater dialogue and faster speed (Schultz, et al., 2011). While the history of social media has roots in social connectedness, there is a recent movement that invokes the concept of crowd-sourcing, whereby useful information is obtained about an event from a large group of impacted audience members in close proximity to the happening or incident (Goolsby, 2010).

The permeation of mobile devices is positively correlated to the rise in prevalence of social media. Smartphone device adoption in 2012 exceeded 60% of the population of the United States, with even higher utility in the 18-35 age range (Crowe, 2012a). Moreover, Facebook, as the leading social networking and media site in the world, has nearly 1-billion active users; more than 50% engage with the site daily (Crowe, 2012a). Of all internet users, over two-thirds actively use social media in some form (Briones, et al., 2011).

Over time, the proliferation of social media has risen steadily, particularly on the wireless college and university environs in which high speed connectivity is a reality. College campuses were early adopters of social media, as demonstrated by Facebook’s initial launch in 2004 at Harvard, followed shortly by peer institutions affiliated with the
Ivy League (Wankel & Wankel, 2011). By 2007, nearly every first year student on college campuses in the United States maintained a Facebook account, with “94% spending several hours a week in active social networking” (Hurtado, 2007). Amongst all adults in 2014, 74% were on social networking sites, with positive correlation between educational attainment, income, and social media usage (Pew Research Center, 2014). Students view social media and social networking sites as a mode through which faculty and administrators should provide educational mentoring and communication (Roblyer, et al., 2010). The college community is the core of many social networking sites.

Social media adoption plays an important role within institutions and their assumed obligation to develop community at both the macro and micro level. Specifically, social media has the power to provide a virtual space in which community members develop a psychological and emotional connection to the institution and individuals, and also to share important experiences, positive and negative (Ahlquist, 2013). Moreover, there is a clear connection between levels of student engagement and technological infusion into campus culture. Students who actively use social media are more likely to be engaged with their campus and attuned to institutional messaging shared through social networking sites (Junco, et al., 2010). There is a role for social media in nearly every academic and administrative function of college and university processes. Social media is integrated into campus culture to create, maintain, and develop college or university-affiliated social relationships (Wankel & Wankel, 2011), but also to serve as a vehicle through which knowledge, information, and business practices can be shared.
Crisis Management

Crisis management is the applied practice of preparation for, response to, and recovery from disruptive events. Defined in stages, crisis management is a process through which organizations minimize potential and unknown risks (Pearson & Clair, 1998). Crisis management is both structured and fluid, often requiring that organizations “adjust to the changing conditions” (Deverell & Olsson, 2010). Responding to a crisis involves use of formal policies, procedures and guidelines. It is shorthand for “all management practices concerned with non-routine phenomena and developments” covering the “managerial areas of prevention and preparation, and, following the immediate crisis response, the sensitive domain of recovery and change” (Dayton, et al., 2004).

Crisis management is a “systematic attempt by organizational members with external stakeholders to avert crises or to effectively manage those that do occur” (Pearson & Clarin, 1998, 61). While much focus is placed on the reactive nature of crisis management, the process is multi-layered and involves planning and preparation before and after a crisis situation. Broadly, crisis management is understood in three functional areas: preparation, coping, and a return to normalcy (Dayton, et al., 2004).

A more expansive view of the crisis management cycle, with an operational focus in institutions of higher education, is posed by Zdziarski, et al., (2007) and defines the stages of crisis to include “planning, prevention, response, recovery, and learning.” Operationally, each of these stages plays an important role in mitigating crisis situations. In the planning stage, the allocation of resources, the identification of roles, the creation of a multi-faceted plan, and the dissemination of teaching and training resources into
organization occurs (Zdziarski, et al.; 2007, Dayton, et al., 2004; Diermeier, et al., 2006). The time to plan for a crisis is not in the midst of a critical incident. Nor should it be assumed that an organization must create and plan for every possible crisis scenario that could potentially impact its physical or human capital (Zdziarski, et al., 2007). Planning must be steadfast and firmly flexible. Many established organizations use pre-defined crisis management teams consisting of cross-functional experts from all functional areas (King III, 2002). Crisis management teams often consist of on-site responder, coordinators, communicators, and managers.

The secondary stage of crisis management is the prevention stage, a time during which consciousness and active avoidance of potentially disruptive incidents is prudent. Prevention requires a careful consideration of specific actions to lessen the likelihood of a crisis or to lessen the impact should a crisis occur (Zdziarski, et al., 2007). The prevention stage often involves use of activities like drills, tabletop simulations, and collaboration exercises, designed to positively impact actual crisis response by increasing learning and fostering innovation (Berlin & Carlström, 2014).

The tertiary stage of crisis management, response, occurs when an actual crisis is imminent or is an active event. This stage requires that the resources of the institution be leveraged to address the immediate and imminent threat to the health, safety, or welfare of humans and the physicality of the infrastructure (Zdziarski, et al., 2007; Kouzmin, 2008). The size and scope of the incident dictates the extent of the response. There may be a need for law enforcement, mental or physical health care, facilities and maintenance work, media management, public relations and outreach, and an awareness of the
instrumental activities of daily living. As such, the third stage must be highly orchestrated, coordinated, and flexible (Diermeier, 2006).

The recovery phase begins once the crisis situation is no longer an active threat to the organization or its constituents. Recovery is characterized by the transition from a sense of danger to a return to normalcy (Dayton, et al., 2004). The severity of impact is a major factor in determining the length of the recovery phase, as are the internal sources of support (Zdziarski, et al., 2007). It may be necessary to involve external agencies to buffer and enhance offerings. Individual and collective accommodations, closure events, remembrances, and recognition and appreciation are all hallmarks of this stage.

The final stage in the Zdziarski model is learning, a period of time in which the institution jointly processes on the successes and failures, updates plans for future response, and engages in reflective inquiry to identify improvements in individual and collective areas of responsibility (2007). Often called “no-fault learning,” the learning phase is a relatively new concept in crisis management, for it recognizes that in spite of all best intentions, incidents will continue to happen (Drupsteen & Guldenmund, 2014). It is imperative that organizations begin to think about crisis not as a liner event, but rather as a complex chain in which great uncertainty exists, balanced only by a multitude of creative perspectives in the response and resolution (De Smet, et al., 2012).

Specific to institutions of higher education, there has been a renaissance of crisis management in the post 9/11 and Virginia Tech environments. Prior to the era of modern crisis, most institutions were not involved in crisis management “unless they were located in areas with the high potential of natural disaster or until major events at other institutions forced colleges and universities to” (Sullivan, 2010).
A college or university crisis plan will not account for every conceivable scenario. However, crisis management on college and university campuses is contingent upon a crisis portfolio that understands and adapts to the institution’s complexity (Wang & Hutchins, 2010). While crisis situations on college campuses include relatively rare acts of terrorism and active shooter situations, a host of other more likely concerns fall within this spectrum. Colleges and universities are subject to an increasing number of concerning incidents that include “grade tampering, ethical breaches by top administrators, harassment and discrimination suits, and student unrest,” as well as scandals involving athletics departments, sexual assault, suicide, fires and facilities issues, and environmental disasters (Wang & Hutchins, 2010). Crimes of opportunity, robberies, residence hall fires, student mental health issues, harassment and Title IX issues constitute some of the daily crises that play out on many college campuses (Zdziarski & Dunkel, 2007).

Crisis planning is an essential management priority for all businesses and organizations, not just higher education. Crisis situations, including those on college and university campuses, are both predictable and unforeseen. However, an institution that responds swiftly to a crisis with visibility and audibility is likely to recover and protect its reputation (Coombs, 2007). Many of the strategies about crisis management on college campus are reactive and fail to acknowledge the need to balance human, academic, and business enterprise needs (Booker, 2014). Institutions of higher education differ from corporate systems in their stakeholders. A college or university typically counts students, alumni, faculty members, staff, parents, governing bodies, regulatory agencies, vendors, local/state/federal government, and community members among its many constituent
stakeholders (Mitroff, et al., 2006). The output of an institution of higher education is also very different than that of a corporate or industrial counterpart – and while some of it can be quantified (employment, economic contribution, research, etc.), much of higher education’s purpose is intrinsic and not easily measured. The value of an institution’s brand is linked to this and is often a significant component of the impetus to respond quickly.

The implications are significant when strategies of crisis management are not incorporated into the ethos of an organization. The fundamental stability and longevity of the system, coupled by a series of challenges to the legitimacy, core assumptions, and beliefs often permeate the discourse when an institution fails to adequately respond to a crisis (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002). An iterative process, organizations learn best from previous crisis situations, either internal or external. This learning must not be limited to administrators and key decision makers; it must also incorporate all individuals affiliated therein. An organization and its constituents must develop a common language and shared meaning that is distributed through a variety of communication practices and behaviors during times of crisis (Veil, 2011). In addition to legal mandates, there is also an ethical and moral imperative to respond to crisis situations. A crisis creates “a need for information” due to high levels of uncertainty and stress (Coombs, 2007). Crisis communication, at its core, is an expression of care and concern for individuals and the larger organization. Crisis communication is no longer disparate or distinct from crisis management. It is intrinsic to the very practices designed to safeguard and mitigate a crisis situation.
Crisis Communication

An essential component of crisis management, crisis communication is a process. It does not involve a single message at one point in time, but rather involves many messages spread over long periods of time, in dynamic and changing conditions, and for a large, diverse, and complex audience (Zimmerman, 2013). Organizationally, many institutions integrate and embed crisis communication into all levels of crisis management and contingency planning. In so doing, stakeholder groups are likely to react positively to responders and have an increased understanding of risks and responsibilities (Ruggiero & Vos, 2013).

Crisis communications, as a process, often originates at the organizational level. However, it can also begin at the constituent level (Veil, 2011). One of the most visible indicators of crisis preparedness on many traditional college campuses is the prevalence of emergency phones, designed to allow for individuals to call for help. These systems are buffered by email, webpages, and text notifications, giving the institution the ability to notify its constituents of emergent and crisis situations (Sullivan, 2012). However, crisis communication is a methodical and intentional process and significant foresight must be given to the tone, tenor, content, and timing of messaging.

Crisis communication is a continuous and strategic process, effective only when it begins before the onset of an actual crisis and concludes only when a resumption of normal activities is satisfactorily achieved (Palttala & Vos, 2012). As crisis situations are inherently unpredictable, so too is crisis communication. Crisis communication must be curated to ensure the expediency and accuracy of information, in a dynamic and turbulent environment (Schraagen, et al., 2010). Such communication is designed to prevent or
lessen the impact, severity and negative outcomes associated with a crisis. Messages often direct or compel the receiver to take a specific action to a specific threat and to create situational awareness of the crisis (Spence, et al., 2007). Crisis messaging must make clear the current state of the crisis and what action steps must be taken to ensure continued safety.

The primary objective of crisis communication is to lessen the uncertainty, respond to and resolve the situation, and learn from it (Ulmer, et al., 2007). This is challenging, for it requires institutions to “communicate expediently and accurately to all stakeholders despite the ambiguity and uncertainty of a crisis” (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000). Complicating this objective is the concept of truth. The ability to anticipate and understand the receiver’s reaction to crisis messaging is both important and impossible. Harro-Loit (2012) suggests that messaging must balance that which the institution wants to share with that which the public wants to hear: “Regardless of whether the receiver’s picture of the crisis is right or wrong, this is where communication has to start. The truth lies with the receiver… Information must be based on what the public wants to know, not what authorities want to say.” This confusing and oppositional reality exposes one of the core challenges of crisis communication.

Crisis communication is most meaningful when “receivers not only understand information, but also retain it accurately and apply it appropriately” (Sellnow, et al., 2014). This poses a challenge for an intergenerational and diverse college or university community, in which the efficiency of crisis communication is mitigated by composing messages that are sender-oriented, rather than receiver-oriented. Tailoring crisis communication to meet the individual preferences of stakeholders and constituents is
impossible in a large and complex organization, but crafting messages that include elements of information explanation and internalization (proximity, timeliness, and personal impact) helps to bridge the rift between sender-oriented communications the needs of the receiver (Sellnow, et al., 2014).

The right communication, directed at the proper audience, can have an extremely positive impact on crisis management. One of the significant contributions of effective crisis communication is the “collective capacity of a community to act to reduce risk” (Comfort, 2007). Communication that is dynamic and triggers a reaction in the recipient is likely to be shared and discussed, furthering the reach and permeating deeper into the impacted population. Convincing the recipient population that a crisis exists, particularly one without visible signs, requires communication that is persuasive and powerful, and challenges individual assumptions that alternate explanations exist (Billings, et al., 1980).

Recipients respond to crisis messaging through a careful, if subconscious, process of considering previous experiences with the crisis at play (Veil, et al., 2008). Success in crisis messaging cannot be linked solely to the number of recipients, though this is an important metric. Rather, the transmission of message to recipients is not the end game of crisis communication – it must be inclusive of whether target audience received, intuited, and reacted to the message (Veil, et al., 2008).

Theoretically, crisis communication can be thought of as an influencer on interpersonal behaviors and actions. Garnett and Kouzmin’s (2007) research on communication during Hurricane Katrina suggests that crisis communication intersects four unique groups: interpersonal, media relations, technology showcase, and inter-organizational networks. The interpersonal is what is traditionally defined as crisis
communication – the institution engaging in direct outreach to impacted constituents and stakeholders. Media relations are the public realm of sharing information with and responding to queries from members of the press. The technology showcase is the world of social networks and fast-paced content. Inter-organizational networks refer to the communicative practices of internal audiences – responders and employees with a designated or inherited crisis management function. Much of the literature in crisis communication focuses on the institutional priority of external communication – to impacted stakeholders or interest groups. However, there is an increasing priority on internal crisis communication – the messaging shared with front-line responders and other close affiliates of the institution during a time of crisis. These internal dimensions mirror external communications but often include additional information and specific guidelines for employees and their role, if any, in mitigating a crisis (Johansen, et al., 2012).

Determining how and when to communicate during a crisis is a quandary for many institutional crisis management teams. The content and delivery is largely, but not wholly, dependent upon the type of crisis (Wester, 2009). Content is created and disseminated differently on Facebook than it is on Twitter or SnapChat. Similarly, institutions often feel compelled to share the same message through all channels, rather than tuning messages to meet the modal requisites of the channel (Wester, 2009). There is often a conflicted duality in crisis communication, bounded by the need to share critical information and limited by an institutional desire to minimize risk (Xu & Li, 2012). Many institutions worry about exposure to additional liability or public criticisms
during a crisis situation and spend significant time and energies crafting communications that minimize risk.

Criticisms abound of formalized crisis communication planning and response. An institutional response is often just one of many sources an impacted constituent or stakeholder will use to gather information about a crisis – many will turn to established personal and social networks as an additional source of information (Vihalemm, et al., 2012). Of even greater concern some individuals will choose to ignore all messaging and remain passive or inactive during a crisis situation.

Facebook has launched a new feature in 2015 called “Safety Check,” which shifts the onus of social media crisis communication from formal bureaucratic institutions to individual users. The tool was first publicly used in Paris following the coordinated attacks in November 2015. Facebook members can turn on the safety check feature to “allow users in an area affected by crisis to mark themselves or others as safe… Twitter, at the same time, put its new ‘Moments’ tool to use, highlighting the top news tweets about the attacks as well as the prayers and good wishes posted by celebrities around the world” (Goel & Ember, 2015).

Specific to institutions of higher education, crisis communication must account for great variance in population and target audience. In crafting crisis communication, college and university officials must account for students, parents, alumni, prospective students, faculty, staff, government and legislative officials, donors, community constituents, media, businesses and contract holders, funders, oversight and regulatory authorities, and the general public. It is a challenging proposition to accommodate the communicative needs of each group, made even more difficult by differences in
educational level, familiarity with the particular crisis, age, experience, language, cultural norms and capital, geographic location and proximity, and social group affiliation (Lawson, 2007). To achieve the maximum impact of crisis messaging, and in acknowledgment of the needs of the recipients, campus crisis communication must consider prioritizing messages for populations based on needs and potential involvement, concentrating messaging on those experiencing the greatest impact, using multiple and compatible methods of communication, and repeating messages to ensure maximum saturation (Lawson, 2007).

A crisis communication plan for institutions of higher education must be compatible and integrated with its larger crisis management plan. There must be an understanding of both likely crises and unexpected crises (Zimmerman, 2013) and a flexible process that enables adaptable communications. Lawson (2007) suggests that institutions of higher education engage in a four-step crisis plan that includes a preparation stage, a response stage, a recovery phase, and a learning phase. During the preparation stage, campus partners should come together to research, write practice, and build relationships with key internal and external stakeholders (Lawson, 2007; Zimmerman, 2013; Comfort, 2007).

During an actual crisis event, the response stage requires an intense focus on crisis communication. The first moments of a crisis situation are often fraught with incomplete and inaccurate information (Garnett & Kouzmin, 2007). The need to communicate quickly comes into conflict with the need to ensure accuracy (Zimmerman, 2013). Lawson (2007) suggests that campus crisis authors work collaboratively to gather facts and verify information, activate crisis communication plans and teams, identify target
audiences, decide which tactics will be most effective, contact partners and institutional experts, plan for the media response, monitor and track all outgoing and incoming messages and information, respond to rumors or misinformation if warranted, and outline a long-term response plan once the immediacy of the situation has been addressed.

There exists a variety of communication tools that can be used by campus leadership to ensure rapid delivery of information to constituents. Using tools such as emergency/preparedness websites, text notifications, email alerts, campus alerts through public address and sirens, media notification, visual paging, reverse phone messaging, and social media, will ensure both dispersion of and internalization of messaging (Zimmerman, 2013).

The recovery stage is characterized by a return to normalcy. Once the immediate risk has passed, the crisis messaging must evolve to convey the transition to normal operations. Additional follow-up should include changes to policy or practice, adjustments to schedules and operations, improvements, and on-going support (Lawson, 2007). There are additional considerations given in this stage to the academic and human needs of the institution, balancing the teaching, research, and service needs of the academic enterprise with the fundamentals of daily living for its population (Myer, 2011).

The final stage, learning, involves an assessment of the crisis communication plan, with formal changes institutionalized for future events. The learning stage can also be characterized by giving community members an opportunity to express their feelings and responses to the crisis communication, further improving the crisis communication planning and response (Myer, et al., 2011). “Valuable feedback information can be obtained from university staff, target audiences, partners, and the media” (Lawson, 2007),
and when done in a timely manner will result in an appropriate balance of reaction and action. The rise in prevalence of social media has created a new direction in crisis communication and has become an intense area of focus for colleges and universities in actualizing their crisis management plans.

**Social Media and Crisis Management**

The power of social media lies in its ability to overcome social distance. By allowing users and individuals to connect virtually, social media fosters the development of strong relationships that offer intimacy, intensity, and emotional support (Gilbert & Karahalios, 2009). Users rely upon and trust many of their social network peers. Social media usage also has a positive influence on institutional and organizational brands – with almost 40% of active internet users reporting a more positive view of groups with an active online presence (Briones, et al., 2011). At its core, social media is about human connection and contains many of the core components of other forms of communication. It is participatory, open, conversational, community-based, and focused on connectivity. Social media allows for individual users to share opinions, insights, experiences, and viewpoints with others (Veil, et al., 2011).

Colleges and universities use social media in a variety of intentional ways. The history of social media and the internet was predicated on the assumption content could be expended. However, as technology evolved, internet and social media consumers realized the potential to create, modify, share, and discuss content, as generated by self or another. Functionally, social media exists to create a sense of personal and group identity, facilitate conversations and the exchange of information, and develop meaningful, albeit virtual, relationships (Kietzmann, et al., 2011). Social media has
evolved to become part of the virtual learning commons, with successful utilization in admissions, teaching and learning, community development, student life, recruitment, health and wellness, and alumni relations. Many colleges and universities are defined as “influential social media creators” with a large and diverse community of followers who are “…conversationalists, critics, collectors, joiners, spectators, and inactives” (Jin, et al., 2014, 89). These groups consume social media generated content both in times of normal operations and in moments of crisis.

Research on using social media in crisis situations is a relatively new phenomenon and a paradigm shift. There are many opportunities to both extract rich and meaningful data from crowd-sourced sources and to share critical information with impacted audiences. As recently as 2011, the American Red Cross “conducted a survey that showed that 33% of citizens have used social media sites including Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and SMS text messages/alerts to gain information about an emergency” (Briones, 2011; McClendon & Robinson, 2012).

Social media has altered the process of crisis communication by integrating online sharing, social networking, and crowd sourcing. As a social construct, social media relies on inherent trust, meaning that the value of the message will only be accepted if the recipient trusts the sender (Nilsson, et al., 2012). Effective social media crisis plans foster a partnership with the audience and communicate with candor and honesty (Veil, et al., 2011). Many established college and university crisis management plans incorporate social media as a stream of information concerned with emergency management operations, or with content generated in response to a critical incident. Due to shortfalls in training and resources, many institutions purposefully neglect the utility of monitoring
and responding to social media content created by those personal users affected by a crisis situation (Latonero & Shklovski, 2011).

The power of social media is also one of its greatest challenges. It is influential in its capacity to reach the public, aid in the formation of impressions, and allow users to share information (Freberg, et al., 2013). Word of mouth, often shared over social media, results in the internal perception that once a message enters the virtual social network, crisis communication managers have lost control of the message (Freberg, et al., 2013). Further, information overload and missing data points contributes to end-user confusion and rumors (Netten & van Someren, 2011). This should not stop crisis managers from leveraging social media during crisis situations, but should compel situational awareness and appropriate caution.

Social media crisis communication relies on information generation and dissemination activities of the general public (Palen, 2008). The power and potential of this communicative tool is inherently crippled without the active engagement of its users. The value and outputs of social media is only as strong as its social base. Moreover, to better connect with and reach the social media users, crisis communication must overcome its “organization-centered and simplistic communication models” (Schultz, et al., 2011). Essentially, social media must not be viewed solely as a social relationship builder and rumor-mill, but rather as a complex, viral, and relational tool that has the capacity enhance the power of the message, rather than exacerbate the crisis.

As information and communication services have strengthened, coupled with the rise of the internet and the mobile internet, the collaborative capacity of social media creates an opportunity for official crisis messaging to be joined with user-generated
content (Hiltz, 2011). This calls into question the role of trust and reputation and knowing whether or not to believe a social media message. This is an incredible gap in social media and crisis communication research and one that must be explored in greater detail.

The viral capacity of social media must be fully exploited by crisis communication managers who have to quickly reach audiences. However, when a cacophony of other voices crowds the shared social media space, authoritative voices will struggle to be heard (Freberg, 2011). To mitigate these forces in opposition, crisis communication strategies for social media must learn to “maximize the advantages of social media while mitigating its disadvantages” (Freberg, 2011). The organizational capacity to own an official social media message must primary. Essentially, to raise the primacy of the social media message, the authoritative source must be one of the first and one of the loudest, and lay claim to the social tagging associated with the event.

Resistance to social media strategy implementation in crisis situations, or avoidance of the technology altogether is a risky endeavor. Stakeholders have a desire, and in some case a legal right or mandate, to be informed of crisis situations that have a personal or geographic impact (Zdziarski & Dunkel, 2007). If an institution fails or chooses to avoid social media communication as a strategy for informing constituents of a crisis, they (the constituents) will often turn to other media sources for information (Stephens & Malone, 2009). Social media use during a crisis situation can no longer be viewed as good practice; rather it is an expectation. The only question for most organizations is choosing which tool to use (Jin, et al., 2014).
Complicating social media adaption on college and university campuses is the intergenerational population of users. Institutions of higher education are inhabited virtually and physically by constituents of varying ages. This creates a challenge for social media content creators, who must balance Web 2.0 technologies with tried and true methods. Throughout its infancy and adolescence, the internet and social media were spaces largely inhabited by younger, educated, and affluent users. Driven partially by barriers to access, lack of education and training, financial costs, and limited desktop or mobile device ownership, Web 2.0 technologies have only recently begun to permeate broad constituencies (Bell, et al., 2013). The unique microclimate of a college or university campus, in which affiliates are provided with and expected to utilize institutionally-provided email and communication tools, coupled with high speed access, offers a unique environment for intergenerational applications of social media technology (Margolis, 2015). While social media is still very much the realm of younger generations, the distribution is skewing older. While popular social media applications like Facebook and Twitter are overwhelmingly populated by users aged 12-24, adults (those aged 25 and older) constitute a growing pool, with 66% using apps on a daily and regular basis (Margolis, 2015, Pew Foundation, 2012). While younger adults, including college students, utilize social media as a primary, and in some cases the sole method, of communication, Xie, et al., (2012), suggests that older adults integrate social media “into their daily life in significant and profound ways” to improve their life and offer protection and information in times of health, wellness, or crisis.

When organizations choose to proactively respond on social media to emergent crisis situations, the public is generally more receptive and willing to engage with the
message. The organization must be close to the point of primary message origination and claim ownership of initial social tagging and ambient information (Jin, et al., 2014). Jin, et al. (2014) contends that when third parties or media claim ownership of social media messaging related to crisis before the impacted institution, the result is anger and loss of trust in future organizational messaging.

While much of the research of social media usage during crisis situations focuses on the communicative capacities of the organization to its constituents, the largely unexamined notion of geospatial and crowd-sourced data points must be explored. Harvesting this information, which is known as volunteered geography, offers insights into the flow of social media information and the human landscape (Stefanidis, et al., 2011). Social media followers can track social media engagement through geographic locations and social network tags, known as ambient intelligence. This rich source of data provides a rounder perspective of how humans are interacting with crisis information and provides an opportunity for crisis communicators to improve, in real-time, the quality and content of their messaging (Stefanidis, et al., 2011).

Volunteered geographic information and ambient intelligence can be gathered and synthesized to create location-based maps with social media content (using photographs, videos, or keywords and micro blog postings). Using this on-the-ground information equips crisis communicators with better information. This practice overcomes traditional hierarchical theories of crisis management, with sources of authority disseminating information in a one-way pipeline (Roche, et al., 2011).

Crisis communication and social media managers must develop the skills to mine social media to detect unexpected or unusual incidents, even ahead of official
notification. In so doing, crisis responders can gain valuable information in a real-time capacity. Social media mining can also help to condense and summarize information, without having to read voluminous individual postings (Cameron, et al., 2012).

Mining can also be used during an active incident to understand the impact of a crisis, identify and classify operational challenges and successes, and conduct a forensic analysis of the incident (Cameron, et al., 2012). Gauging the community reaction provides invaluable insight into the human reactions and perceptions of crisis situations. Personal users of social media can be helpful in crisis situations by posting self-generated content, and by sharing and reposting messages received from members of their social networks (Latonero, 2011). However, institutional social media content creators are often not trained to understand the viral nature of postings nor how to respond to end-user crisis communication engagement, like rumors (Flizikowski, et al., 2014).

Mining can also help to mitigate the impact of rumors and identify influential social media users who are either positively or negatively impacting the quality of content. Rumors are a factor that all communications professionals encounter. While anonymous, and lacking in personally identifiable information, social media invites influential users to have a quasi-celebrity status through their cache and virtual status (Jin & Liu, 2010). Colleges and universities must invoke their influential social media status as well, to maintain virtual order during a time of crisis. Organizations that follow influential social media users will be first in the know about topics, conversations, and discussions of relevance.

Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter allow for the creation of “hashtags,” represented by the symbol “#” followed by a brief descriptive word or phrase identified,
created by the user or inherited by another user. Helsloot and Groenendall (2013), in analyzing social media communications during active crisis situations, report that 97.7% of all content was generated by individual users, not sources of authority. This finding suggests that the viral nature of social media is working – though likely not with full reliability. The loss of message control is considered a secondary outcome to the primacy of effective message delivery (Helsloot & Groenendall, 2013).

The history of social media use in crisis communications can be linked to events like the H1N1 outbreak in 2009, the Haiti earthquake in 2010, the Japanese earthquake/tsunami/radiological disaster of 2011, and Hurricanes Irene and Sandy in 2011 and 2012. However, the first noticeable impact of social media prevalence on crisis management in higher education occurred with the Virginia Tech shootings in 2007. The incident at Virginia Tech is cited as one of the first crisis situations with a heavy social media presence for several factors. The population (college-aged, graduate students, faculty, and academic administrators) was saturated with web-based communication tools. They were a part of an environment with an information technology infrastructure that supported social media (Cohen, 2013). Ironically, the crash of the information infrastructure of the Virginia Tech website from a cataclysmic rise in visits caused information seekers to look for other sources of information such as social media. Such was the critical and transformative moment for crisis management and social media on college and university campuses.

Institutions such as Pennsylvania State University have created online social media hubs, which define the purpose, role, and limitations of social media as tool for general and crisis communication. With clarity, Pennsylvania State University outlines
its philosophy, institutional ethos, and policies and practices with regards to social media and crisis situations (Pennsylvania State University, 2015). This aligns with the best practices in social media crisis engagement and the establishment of a human and technological infrastructure in support of social media as a crisis communication tool (Flizikowski, et al., 2014; Latonero, 2011).

What makes social media usage in crisis situations a rich opportunity for research, particularly within higher education, is the permanence of data and information. Most social media will exist in some form or another in perpetual archives. Comparatively, images of the 9/11 World Trade Center conjure up images of bulletin board postings with the names and vital statistics of the missing. Social media usage suggests that “social interaction in a highly networked world where convergence of people information and media can create new environments—a new ‘space of flows’ within which collective action takes place” (Palen, et al., 2009). This new place, this space, is virtual in its composition, and human in its impact. It is a place and space in which crisis communication in institutions of higher education has a very valued role with continued prominence and impact.

Colleges and universities must also be willing to include social media strategists in crisis management teams and communication operations. By effectively monitoring social media and establishing a centralized hub of information through which crisis communication is shared through traditional and new web technology, institutions will be better prepared to diffuse and manage information being published by others and provide relevant and timely information to constituents and the public (Morris, 2012). Of greater concern, Baer (2015) suggests that only 59% of colleges and universities in the United
States have a social media crisis plan, with most failing to respond to social media conversations generated in response to crisis situations. The inaction of college and universities to implement social media crisis planning cannot be ignored. Social media is becoming a primary mode of communication for many institutional constituents, compelling action on the part of college and university administrators to provide timely and relevant information through new and established channels.

**Institutional Culture and Social Media**

The culture of an institution and its relationship with social media is often a determinant in its strategy for using new web and mobile technologies in both crisis and non-crisis communication. A willingness to utilize social media to communicate during times of crisis is often predicated on the permissiveness of senior leadership to allow social media content creators the license and freedom to communicate in this new form of media. Social media requires the adoption of both a new language and quicker timeframe in which to operate. Bhangay (2014) insists that institutions often view social media as an externality or a response to the culture of its students, faculty, staff, and other constituents. Rather, social media use, or resistance to use, is a reflection of the very culture of an institution. Social media tools, like Facebook and Twitter, are “means for developing better understanding, and for enhancing communication connections between people, ultimately contributing to the success of an organization” (76). Social media is not separate and distinct from the larger organizational culture of an institution of higher education, but rather is an irremovable component that can be leveraged for good or left to fester.
Colleges and universities are frequently concerned about the protection of their brand and work hard to ensure that a positive view is shared through in-person, print, and online mediums. By offering and actively maintaining social media spaces, institutions of higher education can simultaneously maintain its priorities and centralize organizational culture and associated constituent cultures, like that of engaged students, faculty, and staff. Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, and Gonzalez Canache (2012) suggest that inviting members of the campus community to an institution’s social media spaces can only service to enhance its positively perceived culture – but that its social media content must be relevant: “Without giving students good reason for following the university’s account – by providing content that is relevant or useful to their collegiate experience – they may remain disengaged” (Davis, et al., 16). Social media, particularly for students, speaks loudly about how the institution prioritizes its capacity to communicate and engage with its audience.

Schein (1996) argues that institutional culture is a triad representing operators, engineers, and executives. In applying Schein’s work to social media, operators (students, parents, faculty, and administrative staff) would be the recipients of crisis communication. Engineers, those responsible for crisis response and communication, act on behalf of the institution to craft and disseminate timely information in times of emergent need. Executives, including senior level university officials, are those in permission must be sought for engineers to communicate with operators. Schein (1996), though not writing about social media, can be used to articulate that social media is a cultural artifact of an institution and that its leaders must not only think about incentives or control, but must also be concerned with “shared values and beliefs because they are
dealing with thousands, rather than a few immediate subordinates” (232-233). Schein’s lens asserts that the needs and wants of the leadership, the staff, and the community must align.

Arslan and Zaman (2014) directly applies this theory to the modern social media era. They assert that social media is an institutional artifact, a materialized reflection of its values (2). Moreover, social media is used by both leadership and its internal and external constituents “to frame events inside as well as outside the organization” (3). How crisis situations are framed, from a posture of proactivity, to defense and reactivity, is reflection of the institutional value placed on the utility of social media as a crisis communication tool.

**Conclusion**

As crisis management strategies become further entrenched in the operational and administrative protocols for college and university campuses, a growing awareness of the role and power of social media as a tool for communication must be considered. Social media is no longer a technology and practice used exclusively by younger generations – with growing fervor it has permeated nearly every age group. It is integrated into the very ethos of modern society. Social media is viewed as an extension of personhood and physical space. It has been integrated into personal, social, academic, and professional lives in innumerable ways. As alpha and influential content creators, colleges and universities have an obligation and a responsibility to successfully integrate social media strategy into crisis response.

The institutional reliance on email and texts during a critical or disruptive incident was designed to facilitate the mass notification of campus constituents. As social media
blurs the boundaries between what is physical and what is virtual, there must be an awareness of and allegiance to communicating through technologies that successfully bridge these two realities. College and university crisis teams must be willing to actively involve engage with their online constituents, in spite of concerns of affiliation, and proactively respond to questions, concerns, and rumors generated by personal users. The risks of not doing so far outweigh the values of a reliably informed physical and virtual campus community.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to examine the use of social media in crisis situations on college and university campuses. Crisis situations continue to both challenge and strain higher education administrators. Most institutions have well-developed plans to prepare, respond, mitigate, and recover from operationally disruptive events. However, there is a chasm between the successful management of complicated crisis situations and institutional, stakeholder, and public perception as defined by social media. The rise of social media has proven to be an essential component of a communication toolkit in higher education. It can be used powerfully to inform campus constituents of the right information at the right time to make the right decisions regarding health, safety, wellness, and direction. However, not every crisis situation on college and university campuses involves immediate threats to the safety and well-being of people or the physical infrastructure. Some campus crisis situations are academic or have root in controversial research or speakers, or are based in leadership or politics.

This research will seek to explore the ways in which colleges and universities use social media to prepare for, respond to, mitigate, and recover from crisis situations impacting and/or disrupting normal campus operations. Drawing on the research conducted into crisis management by Kouzmin (2008), Palen, et al. (2009), Veil, et al. (2011), Wang and Hutchins (2010) Zdziarski (2007) and building upon the emerging knowledge of social media conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2010), the University of California Higher Education Research Institute’s study on the American Freshman (2014), Schultz and Goritz (2011), Sellnow, et al. (2014), and
Stephens and Malone (2009), this study seeks to fill in the gaps and provide additional information and context about how and why colleges and universities are using social media to prepare, respond, mitigate, and recover from crisis situation. Data will be gathered through interviews with key campus administrators, a review of crisis management and communication plans, and an analysis of social media activity.

**Research Questions**

This study will explore the phenomenon of social media in crisis management on college and university campuses. Specifically, the particular design of this qualitative study seeks to examine how social media is being used to handle crisis situations and understand how that use has been informed by social media activity and presence in other areas of the university. The overarching research question is, “How and what social media technologies are selected, planned for, implemented, and monitored in crisis management in selected universities?” Secondary research questions will explore corollary components of social media and crisis management and include the following:

1. How do colleges and universities select and embed social media technologies into crisis management communication plans?
2. What is the institutional process and who are the institutional stakeholders involved in the creation and dissemination of social media crisis communication?
3. In what ways do college and university crisis communication staffs monitor and respond to social media during the myriad stages of crises?
4. How do colleges and universities evaluate the success of their social media crisis communication?
A series of qualitative research practices using case studies of three institutions including document analysis, social media analysis, and interviews, will assist the interview in the identification of findings and analysis.

**Research Methodology**

For the purposes of this study, a qualitative research design is the preferred methodology. Cresswell (2013) posits that qualitative research is “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (loc. 1083) and that by collecting data in the natural environment the researcher becomes a key component of the instrument. Through the collection of data (planning documents and social media communication), observation of social media use, and interviewing key constituents, a fuller picture of strategy will emerge. Creswell (2013) suggests that qualitative research be used when “an issue or problem needs to be explored (loc. 1140). The emergence of new technologies and opportunities to implement crisis strategy within are best explored through qualitative research.

To understand the “how” and the “why” colleges and universities use social media in crisis communications, it is necessary to “understand the world from the perspective of those living in it… to capture the perspectives that actors use as a basis for their actions in specific social settings” (Hatch, 2002, 7). This study will largely focus on the subjective perspectives and meanings made by the participants. Naturalistic in design, there are multiple perspectives and realities that frame the knowledge and application of social media in crisis situations. As such, a narrative case study design will allow for the best understanding of the social phenomenon of crisis management and social media implementation. The narrative case study will provide a fuller examination
of lived experiences (crisis situations) and review the response (institutional crisis communication through social media).

**Site and Participant Selection**

Purposeful sampling was used to identify the institutions selected for this study. There were three primary considerations in purposeful sampling. Specifically, “the decision as to whom to select as the participants (or sites) for the study, the specific type of sampling strategy, and the size of the sample to be studied” (Creswell, 2013, loc. 3039). The intentionality of the selections was purposeful because participants “can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon being studied” (Creswell, 2013, loc. 3060). Important decisions must be made about the “who” or “what” should be sampled, what form the sampling will take, and how many people or sites will be sampled. It is often important that “the inquirer purposefully selects multiple cases to show different perspectives on the issue” (Creswell, 2013, loc. 2151). The size of the sample was an important factor in determining both the validity and generalizability of the research. Creswell (2013) suggests that it is not the size of the sample, but rather the extensive detailed collected from each participant that adds value.

The sites posited for research – University A, University B, and University C – have been selected with intentionality and with purpose. As large, urban, and private research universities, each has a significant social media infrastructure and plans for crisis management. Moreover, the physical location of the sites, in a mid-sized mid-Atlantic city, a major northeastern city, and a west coast major city are important qualifiers as the cities are bases of technology and social media saturation. The similarities of campus and constituents further link the sites. Each of these cities are
physically located in the largest metropolitan regions in the country. Each of these institutions has experienced a variety of natural or man-made crisis situations, either directly on campus or physically co-located within their municipality with an impact on campus.

**University A**

University A, a private institution located in the residential neighborhood of a mid-sized mid-Atlantic city, is a research intensive institution that houses a school of Arts and Sciences, a School of Education, and a School of Engineering. Seven additional graduate schools are affiliated to form larger institution and are geographically disparate from the primary campus. Founded in the late 1800’s, University A is a leading U.S. academic institution in total research and development spending and is the largest employer in its state. According to its fact book, there are 6,023 undergraduate students and nearly 15,000 graduate students, supported by 15,000 academic staff and 3,100 administrative staff. The main campus is the location of the primary undergraduate divisions and administrative operations. In recent years, its city has struggled with significant crime, protest activity, and civil unrest. University A has been both directly and indirectly impacted by events in the community, noticeably with regards to student safety.

**University B**

University B, located in an urban neighborhood of a large northeastern city, is the one of largest private universities in the world. Founded in the mid 1800’s, the institution is now organized into 20 schools, colleges, and institutes. University B’s fact book maintains that there are over 6,500 academic staff and 2,200 administrative staff
supporting over 58,000 students (26,000 undergraduates, 24,000 graduate and professional students, and 8,000 non-credit students). The primary campus has over 5 million square feet of academic space, housing over 11,000 students. There are branch campuses located in Asia and the Middle East and numerous study abroad and global locations around the world. In recent years, University B has experienced a variety of crisis situations, including widespread disruptions following Hurricane Sandy, geopolitical instability in global locations, and campus-adjacent building explosions.

University C

Located in a major west coast city, University C was founded in the late 1800’s in an urban neighborhood abutting the downtown proper. Two additional campuses are near the primary campus, a health sciences center north of downtown and a Children’s Hospital complex of greater distance. University C’s fact book claims that the university enrolls 19,000 undergraduate students and 24,000 graduate and professional students in 18 academic schools. There are 3,945 academic staff and 13,216 administrative staff spread out over 308 urban acres. University C has experienced a variety of crisis situations stemming from earthquakes and other natural disasters, riots and large-scale disruptions, and acts of violence.

Entry and Initial Contact

I made contact with key campus administrators on each campus who have a designated role in crisis management. My knowledge of crisis management and social media facilitated access at each institution. After identifying the institutions, I contacted via email a Vice President for Administration (or position of equivalency), a Vice President for Student Affairs (or position of equivalency), a Vice President for
Communication (or position of equivalency) and a member of the emergency operations team to gain initial entry and to identify the appropriate institutional stakeholders from which additional participants could be identified.

**Participant Selection**

I interviewed the following affiliates at University A: the vice provost for academic and student affairs, the chief of staff to the vice provost, the director of emergency management, the director of public safety, the director of residential life, the executive director of media relations and crisis communications, the director of social media, a tenured faculty member in public health, a parent in the class of 2018, and a student and resident assistant in the class of 2017.

At University B, I interviewed the following affiliates: the senior vice provost, the senior director of residential life, the director of emergency management, the operations manager for public safety, the manager of university web communications, the senior director of communications, the marketing communications manager, the social media communications manager, the associate director of residential life, the associate director of global student affairs, a tenured faculty member and former global site director in the department of French language, a parent in the class of 2016, and a student in the class of 2016.

I interviewed the following affiliates at University C: the vice president for administration, the chief of police, the director of emergency planning, the fire safety and emergency planning specialist, the business continuity specialist, the director of media relations and communications, the social media manager, the vice president for student affairs, the associate dean of liberal arts, a tenured faculty member in the school of
business, the director of residential life, the assistant director of residential life, two residential area supervisors, a student in the class of 2018, and a parent in the class of 2017.

Table 3.1 shows the functional roles and affiliations of participants across the three institutions in my study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function/Affiliation</th>
<th>University A</th>
<th>University B</th>
<th>University C</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Administration</td>
<td>Vice Provost</td>
<td>Senior Vice Provost</td>
<td>Vice President for Administration</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Chief of Staff</td>
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<td>Public Safety</td>
<td>Director of Public Safety</td>
<td>Operations Manager</td>
<td>Chief of Police</td>
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<td>Emergency Management</td>
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<td>Fire Safety and Emergency Planning Specialist</td>
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<td>Business Continuity Specialist</td>
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<td>Student Affairs</td>
<td>Director of Residential Life</td>
<td>Senior Director of Residential Life</td>
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<td>Associate Director of Residential Life</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Associate Director of Global Student Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>Executive Director of Media Relations and Crisis Communications Director of Social Media</td>
<td>Manager of Web Communications Senior Director of Communications Marketing Communications Manager Social Media Communications Manager</td>
<td>Director of Media Relations and Communications Social Media Manager</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Data Collection

In a qualitative case study, with a significant narrative component, Yin (2009) articulates several mechanisms of data collection inclusive of document review, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts. For the purposes of this study, a review of both the campus crisis management plan and the crisis communication plan that were reviewed. The document review stage was conducted at the onset to provide a comprehensive understanding of the campus, its physical and social media infrastructure, and the active agents involved in the crisis response and crisis communication protocols. The documents were coded, following Creswell’s (2007) multistep process in which data files are created and organized, with categorical aggregation, to allow for direct interpretation and naturalistic generalizations.

Another crucial component of data collection involved interviews with the primary participants selected at each of the institutions. The vice presidents or vice provosts of administration and student affairs, executive directors of communications, and directors of public safety were selected with intent as these positions served as the primary administrator responsible for the overall management of their functional area at each institution.
The chair or executive of the campus crisis team or workgroup was also purposefully selected as this individual serves as the primary leader of the collaborative institutional team that comes together when an incident impacted the normal operations of the institution, or poses a sense of immediate risk and harm to the people, academic mission, or physical infrastructure of the campus. Often, this individual served as the gatekeeper, through which many crisis decisions are made.

The final primary interview subject was identified as a communications officer or social media manager within the institution’s crisis management team. This position was responsible for the implementation and leveraging of the social media output, for creating and executing social media messages, for responding to inquiries received, and for tracking and evaluating the institutional messaging.

At each campus, and with the consultation of the key institutional contacts, I spoke with additional campus authorities deemed to have role in crisis management and social media communication. These additional interviewees included representatives and designees from student affairs, residence life or campus housing, media relations, public safety/police, facilities and operations, and government/community relations. These additional interview subjects offered context and information related to campus crisis situations on a localized and operational level. I also spoke at length with a tenured faculty member, an undergraduate student, and a parent on each campus, rounding out the critical stakeholders and recipients of crisis communication.

One of the most critical components of the research design involves sourcing archival data that is freely available as open-source. The categorization of information through markers like the “#” (hashtag), the “@” (at) for personal replies, and nearly the
full social media history of an individual or institutional user are available through simple search protocols. Moreover, the entire engagement activity (views, replies, forwards, and other interactions) is largely available as free and open-source archival data, easing my access to information needed to analyze the impact of social media utilization during crisis situations on college and university campuses. I identified, in consultation with the site, one particular crisis lens around which to frame the initial inquiry. At University A, I examined the impact of recent civil unrest in the city. At University B, I looked at how the institution responded through social media to Hurricane Sandy. At University C, I looked at how the institution responds to ongoing campus crime and violence and mitigates the threat of natural disasters through social media. This study was not conducted as an assessment of an institution’s particular response to the specified crisis. Rather, the selection of a particular crisis phenomenon was used as a lens through which social media activity could be reflected.

I spent between two and three days on site at each institution and spoke with each participant for lengths of time that varied between thirty and ninety minutes. Key participants who were unavailable for in-person conversations spoke with me via telephone. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed and participants were offered the opportunity to review and edit final transcripts. At the request of one institution and confirmed with the other two, anonymity of both the participants and the institutions was offered. This confidentiality facilitated greater trust between my participants and me. Additional documents, including crisis management and communication plans, were triangulated with interview data and afforded the same confidentiality.
Data Analysis and Conceptual Framework

To best analyze the myriad points of data collected, triangulation offers the ability to “make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence… to corroborate evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective” (Creswell, 2013, loc. 4658). For the purposes of this investigation, it was important to triangulate the data gathered from the crisis management plans/crisis communication plans, the interviews conducted with the identified administrators, and the metrics of social media (history, archived information, “#” and “@” utilization, forwards, replies, and other engagement activity).

In visualizing the conceptual framework through which this research was conducted, Figure 3.1 is helpful.
Interview Protocol

To ascertain consistency and validity, I identified a suite of questions that included crisis definitions and social media management strategies. This study explored the phenomenon of crisis management on college and university campuses through the lens of social media. Specifically, the particular design of this qualitative study examined how social media is being used to handle crisis situations and understand how that use
has been informed by social media activity and presence in other areas of the university.

The overarching research question was, “How and what social media technologies are selected, planned for, implemented, and monitored in crisis management in selected universities?” The following questions were asked of participants, in a semi-structured and narrative format. I adjusted questions to ascertain the role-specific information unique to each participant.

**Interview Questions**

1. What are the types of crisis situations with which you have been involved?
2. What are the types of crisis situations that have impacted your campus?
3. How does your institution embed social media technologies into crisis management plans? How does it fit in with email and text notification / emergency notification systems and/or stable institutional websites?
4. How does your institution select which social media and Web 2.0 technologies to use for crisis communication?
5. What is the institutional process and who are the institutional stakeholders involved in the creation and dissemination of social media crisis communication on your campus?
6. What, if any, role does the social media staff play on your crisis management team?
7. In what ways does your crisis communication staff monitor and respond to social media during the myriad stages of crises?
8. Does your institution actively engage with social media users in times of crisis to share information, address rumors, correct misinformation, or redirect followers to an established university website or resource?

9. How long, from incident occurrence, does it take for your team to convene? For initial communications to be sent? Who are the key administrators involved in this conversation?

10. How do you measure the success of your social media engagement strategy?

11. Does your institution use standard and recognizable social media identifiers like a # (hashtag) or @ (at)?

12. How do you measure the success of your crisis management plan and of your crisis communication strategies through social media?

13. Has there been a change in your social media strategy or engagement following a crisis?

14. How do you believe your constituents prefer to receive crisis communication? How does it change for younger community members and for older community members?

15. How does your institution evaluate the success of their social media crisis communication?

16. Are there areas for innovation or future opportunities you see for social media and crisis management?

17. Do you have any other thoughts or considerations that you would like to share about your institution’s use of social media during times of crisis?
Through the participant interviews I sought to understand how crisis management at the selected universities utilized social media tools during the varying stages of crisis management. I asked modified version of the interview protocols of the additional interviewees from student affairs, residence life or campus housing, media relations, public safety/police, and additional crisis responders.

**Data Collection Methods**

Multiple sources of data were utilized to conduct this study. A primary data collection point focused on an analysis and review of the three institution’s crisis management plans. Crisis management plans served to guide an institutional response during a disruptive event. A comprehensive review of the plans and any corollary or supporting documents resulted in my construction of an institutional crisis management profile. I then looked at and coded for broad themes related to crisis management practices and behaviors, with specific focus and attention on coding communication and social media dissemination. I also reviewed several dissertations on crisis management in higher education, searching for areas of future research that intersected with social media.

Qualitative research hinges on successful participant interviews. To practice and develop meaningful questions, I also conducted a pilot study with three colleagues at my present and former institutions of employment. The pilot study resulted in several enhancements to interview protocols that clarified questions and honed focus. I conducted the pilot study through one-on-one interviews, in person, online, and via telephone. The interviews were semi-structured, using pre-determined questions that
yielded open-ended responses. This practice greatly aided my skill and technique in
interviewing final participants.

The last major area of data collection comes from social media. I examined social
media engagement on broad and daily level, as well as social media related to specific
crisis or disruptive situations. I sought to understand how the institutions in my study
used social media at various points of institutional crisis management, including
planning, prevention, response, recovery, and learning. As an open-source
communication medium, I had largely unrestricted access to institutional social media
postings related to crisis situations by searching for key tags and geo-based terms. I also
examined non-institutional postings, as generated by key campus stakeholders including
students, parents, faculty members, and staff. I looked specifically at the engagement
between institutional social media during crisis and its viral nature with constituents to
understand its utilization.

I also examined the quality of social media crisis communication compared with
both the frequency and viral nature of messaging. I looked for commonalities between
and across institutional sites to code for similar language, time from incident to message,
and behavioral response of the audience. To code the social media content, I triangulated
interview participant responses with the documents analyzed during the review of the
established crisis management plans.

Bryant (2004) suggests that qualitative researchers should “find themes or
recurrent ideas of sufficient importance” in the question to help answer a research
question (100). I identified these recurrent themes as they appear in interviews,
emergency management and crisis protocols, communication practices, and in social
media activity to tell the story of crisis management at selected institutions through social media. I expected to find great interest in using social media in crisis management, but a lack of resources and time to do so successfully.

**Trustworthiness and Reliability**

I had existing connections to each of the institutions studied, either as a student, employee, or colleague to senior administration. The duality of my relationship suggests that while I had greater understanding of the institutional culture, structures, systems, procedures, and administrators, I had to exercise caution and diligence to rely on the data uncovered during my investigation and not on my pre-conceived knowledge or experiences.

**Validity**

To ensure the accuracy of understanding, oral communication, and interviewer notes, all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by a confidential external transcription service. A question reference sheet, used only by me, was created ahead of time to ensure consistency of questions and content. Non-biographical or non-demographical questions related to the individual or institutions were structured in an open-ended manner so as to facilitate maximum qualitative output.

Member checking comprised a significant component of the research methodology instituted to ensure greater validity, connecting my conclusions to data. I repeated back to participants my interpretation of the dialogue and asked for the participants to reflect on the accuracy of the account. Triangulation was further implemented to ensure the continuity of information gathered from document reviews,
participant interviews, and social media postings. By corroborating evidence collected from different sources and types, I was able to increase the validity of the research.

**Researcher Bias**

As in all qualitative and humanistic research, researcher bias may exist and impact both the interpretation of data and the shared-meaning of participant responses. As a member of my professional institution’s crisis management team and as an avid user of social media, I was cognizant of my role, preconceived notions, or biases during both the interview and data gathering stages. Crisis situations are challenging and stressful for all involved and I sought to create an interview environment in which there was no-fault learning, facilitating confidential and frank conversations with participants. I did not share my personal thoughts or opinions about the responses to crisis situations and social media use.

**Limitations and Ethical Considerations**

In qualitative research, given the small sample of participants and institutions, results in findings that cannot be generalizable. The value of qualitative research lies in its capacity to explore, in great detail, a specific phenomenon specific to an individual or an institution. However, careful consideration and planning was made to ensure that the findings should both be credible and dependable.

The interviews were conducted one on one, between the interviewer and the interviewee, or in small group settings of functional employees. This type of research has the potential to produce results and data rich in meaning. However, memories and experiences in and of themselves are biased, tarnished by time and space. To help feel
the participants feel at ease, I suggested that most interviews be conducted in the private offices or a mutually agreed upon space at which the participant felt comfortable.

Social media itself is a significant limitation of this research. Social media exists outside of many formal and established communication protocols. Save for imminent threats to safety or wellness, or violations of terms of service, social media is not policed or fact-checked for accuracy. The viral nature of social media, coupled with the speed with which it is executed, precludes significant fact checking and verification mechanisms.

I have not identified any significant ethical concerns stemming from my research topic. At the institutional level, there may exist increased awareness about reputational issues, particularly related to crisis situations in which there was a negative media presence. At the individual level, there is a small risk that the information shared by one participant might cast negatively on another or on the operational processes of the institution during times of crisis. As crisis management teams are relative small and specialized, it is possible for there be knowledge of who was interviewed and what was said. Every precaution will be taken to minimize these risks and to ensure the anonymity of participants.

Summary

Through use of a qualitative study that follows protocols established for rigor in a naturalistic and narrative case study design, this analysis offers credible insight into the impact of social media during crisis situations on college and university campuses. Using data authored, shared, and engaged with in real time, balanced with an analysis of written protocols, and administrator interviews, afforded me the ability to better understand the
impact of social media proliferation during times of crisis on select college campuses and understand whether or not pre-crisis social media use impacts the success of social media crisis communication.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was the exploration of how and what social media technologies are selected, planned for, implemented, and monitored in crisis management at selected institutions of higher education. This research was conducted at three large, research-intensive, private, urban universities in the United States during September and October of 2015. University A is located in the Middle Atlantic region, University B is located in the Northeast Corridor, with a significant global presence, and University C is located in the southwest Pacific basin.

These institutions were intentionally selected for their institutional similarities, recent crisis-level activity, and social media application deployment. Crisis situations and crisis management is inextricably linked to institutional reputation and public perception. At the request of several participants and as agreed to by all parties, both the institutions and the interviewees will remain anonymous. Institutional pseudonyms were created and participants are identified by title only. Institutional descriptions are provided with sufficient information to offer relevant context but not illuminate the identity of individuals or their affiliated institutions.

The findings of this study are divided into two sections. The first section provides an overview of campus study sites and explores university-specific crisis, social media, and crisis management practices and behaviors, as described by the guiding research questions. The second section explores the emergent themes across the three universities and discusses both the implementation and utility of social media as a crisis management tool. The final section of this chapter, the analysis, offers a series key findings of social
media as a tool for the management of crisis situations at the researched institutions as informed by both the site overview and discussion of emergent themes.

**University A Analysis**

University A is located in a residential neighborhood of a medium to large sized city, 3.5 miles north of downtown business district. The 140-acre campus is home to 5,000 undergraduate and graduate students and is the administrative hub of the educational enterprise. First and second-year undergraduates are housed in campus residence halls, with the remaining students populating private apartments in the adjacent neighborhood. This campus location is home to the college of arts and sciences and the school of engineering. Spread throughout the city and its metropolitan area are a collection of graduate schools, medical campuses, research institutes, and centers.

At University A, key administrators were interviewed in functional areas that spanned public safety, emergency management, central administration, student affairs, communications and media relations, and social media. Additionally, a member of the faculty, a student, and the parent of an undergraduate student were included as participants. All interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes and conducted between October 20-30, 2015, either in-person or via telephone. From a social media perspective, University A has over 122,000 “likes” on Facebook and over 52,000 “followers” on Twitter.

As an urban institution, University A has both a prolonged and recent history of crisis situations impacting operations. From the student affairs perspective, crisis is viewed on a continuum spanning individual crisis to community crisis. The director of
emergency management at University A indicated that it was his operational mandate to think about crisis situations in two broad categories. Specifically:

The first is what I’ll call traditional emergencies. It could be a weather event or a power outage or some sort of traditional types of these events. Every time we have a big snow event we’ve lost power on campus. I think often about Hurricane Irene and Sandy. We even had an active shooter at University A hospital. All of those I consider traditional emergencies. The other are the sort of non-traditional, non-emergency crisis… so the legal reputation, etc., etc., so something happens, frat party or there’s a big lawsuit against us, or that sort of thing.

The director of emergency management differentiates that which immediately impacts the health or safety of individuals or the campus from crises that are strictly reputational, though he acknowledges that much of the institutional response is the same. The director of emergency management indicated that the most recent and salient example of institutional crisis was the recent spate of civil unrest in the city, stemming from the lack of judicial action following allegations of police misconduct. This civil unrest spanned several days, involved hundreds and thousands of protestors, a small number of agitators, and a large law enforcement presence. While the campus and its immediate and adjacent streets were protected, a significant amount of unrest occurred just outside of the campus proper, resulting in University A sealing its perimeter, suspending operations, and instituting a shelter-in-place order.

The director of public safety, who oversees safety and security operations on the main campus and serves in a coordinative role with satellite campuses, offered a series of situations that fall under the umbrella of crisis:

Worst case scenario would be either a large scale incident like a fire or a weather event that majorly impacts the university. Or it can boil down to things like people trespassing. It can be a Clery Act violation, or it could be something like a student party getting out of hand. It kind of runs the
gamut, so you sort of have to be prepared to respond to any and everything. Of course, last spring, we had the riots in our city.

The director of public safety defined a crisis as “any sort of incident that can disrupt the normal activity… not only from a security perspective but from a safety perspective as well.”

The director of residential life cited student behavior, particularly as influenced by alcohol and other illegal substances, as the most common of crises experienced at the University A. The director of residential life was also concerned about the physicality of the infrastructure and noted several instances in which aging facilities experienced plumbing, electrical, gas, or other disruptions that resulted in temporary evacuations and relocations. Another student affairs administrator in a key leadership position, the chief of staff to the vice provost, noted the rise of sexual assaults and its associated media coverage as a significant crisis impacting the institution. The chief of staff, who has a significant tenure at University A, also referenced several high profile student suicides, injuries, and deaths on campus, some of which were a result of acts of violence or homicide and some of which were the result of health or medical issues. Both of the student affairs administrators indicated that the recent civil unrest was perhaps the greatest and most recent example of crisis to impact University A in recent years. The vice provost also referenced many of the same concerns, with a particular nod to cases involving student deaths and significant weather events that disrupted normal campus operations over a period of several days, as was the case with Hurricane Sandy and the spring civil unrest.
From the communications perspective, much of the defined crises situations are reputational in nature. The executive director of media relations and crisis communications offered that physical crises were far fewer in number:

For the most part they tend to be more reputational crises than physical crises, but there has been in my time here quite a number of the latter, with three students violently murdered and we’ve had more mundane things like small loud explosions or small fires and things like that. More generally it’s somebody who did something stupid, usually a student but sometimes a faculty member… We prepare more for reputational crises because we have less experience for it than the more emerging physical crises. We do our table top exercises; they tend to be something like a chemical leak or an active shooter or something like that.

The executive director of media relations and crisis communications also referenced the recent civil unrest in the city, stating “…the most obvious example is the riots in [the city], which did affect this campus and also the university as a whole… There was no real damage to any University A property, but I can certainly appreciate how outside events can affect us.” The social media director also affirmed that much of his work involved the management of reputational crises. However, the social media director spoke about the impact of the civil unrest as an example of a situation that spanned both reputational and physical spectrums:

What I saw during the riots was that not only was it a physical crisis, it actually was a reputational crisis that was percolating at the same time. As an institution, we were rightfully grasping with a physical threat to our campus. At the same time as we were preparing for a potential physical issue on campus we were also managing talking about contingencies for a “Race in America” forum, this first of its kind event that was really important to the university. It was really kind of wild actually… it was scheduled for several days after the riots and in addition to managing [communications] about campus safety, we are also trying to make sure that this event is still viable and guarantee the safety of the students at the event.
The intersection of reputational and physical crisis situations remained at the surface and actively influenced university agents in the management of crisis situations at various stages of crisis.

The student perception about crisis at University A was more attuned to crisis situations impacting the health and safety of students. The student cited the recent death of a lacrosse-player classmate and an act of violence allegedly committed at a fraternity house as salient examples of recent crisis situations. The student indicated that she was enrolled at University A at the time of the civil unrest and indicated that she hadn’t slept much during the onset and its immediate impacts.

The faculty member interviewed indicated a cursory awareness of the mundane crisis situations impacting student life and also acknowledged the impact of weather and other standard and expected crisis. However, he referenced the “city riots” as a critical moment for the campus. This faculty member holds dual appointment and splits his time between the main campus and one of its satellite health science campuses. As such, he professed varying levels of geographically-dependent crisis situational awareness. The main campus was marginally impacted by the protest activity while the health campus was located within an active zone of civil unrest and protest activity. Calling the main campus “the crosswalk of the university,” the faculty member expressed concern that the institution, given its disparate physicality, did not distinguish campus-specific impacts of the incidents and seemed primarily focused on its main site.

The final participant interviewed at University A was the parent of a second year student, living over 200 miles away from campus. The parent’s views of crisis situations at University A were shaped largely by the civil unrest of the previous spring, when her
student was in his first year. Stating that much of her initial information and perceptions about the situation came from national news media, the parent observed a disconnect between that which was reported by the press and that which was shared by her student and the institution:

Listening when driving to work in the morning, I would turn on NPR and I would get one story. Then you turn go and turn on CNN and it looks like the whole city is burning down. It was all very stressful and unstructured.

The parent referenced a standing “parents-only” Facebook account in which other parents were discussing the riotous behavior and demanding information and action from the institution, including armed protection for the campus perimeter. It was through direct conversation with her student and from university communications that the parent felt assured of the safety of her student.

The vice provost also referenced parents and suggested that “…one of the things we’re just starting, and we are not where we need to be, is around how do we use Facebook as a way to communicate more efficiently with parents, versus having to write them email updates” and take time away from crisis management to talk. The director of residential life indicated that the period of civil unrest in University A’s city was the institution’s biggest test of crisis management, complicated by the divergent needs of parents, students, and the institution:

I really think the biggest thing that comes to my mind is the [city name] civil unrest in terms of crisis management and communications… but also managing the parents versus the students. The parents wanted to know everything that was going on, but a large number of students were apathetic to what was going on. So there was a lot to manage in that situation. With that being said, some of the crisis management communications that we played with were challenged by what students or parents think they deserve to hear… And since X amount of people have to sign off on the language, I think we could probably be faster and more
responsive if fewer people were involved.

The director of residential life indicated that University A’s social media plan for incoming students is drastically different from its utility during crisis situations and that there is active engagement and interaction between admissions officers and prospective or accepted students, but that this level of activity is not carried through past the point of matriculation.

Similarly, the director of public safety suggested that it would be in his institution’s best interest to consider how to better integrate student social media accounts into its emergency databases:

For those who are freshman, who are registering for courses, it is part of the registration process, so you are automatically prompted to give information such as your cell phone number. We know what their email address is, because it’s assigned, but why don’t we consider students opting in to provide social media contacts.

The director of public safety believes that the opt-in mechanisms through which University A collects contact information to use during crisis may work for faculty and staff, but is not relevant for students.

**University A Crisis Planning**

University A has comprehensive crisis management plan, designed to prepare for, minimize the impact of, and resume normal operations following a disruptive event or crisis situation. Chaired by the vice provost, the emergency management team coordinates the response to all high-level crisis situations. The vice provost serves as the point-person between the president and provost and the incident command crisis responders. Joined by key partners from student affairs, public safety and security, institutional equity, risk management, and general counsel, and academic affairs, this
group controls all crisis and crisis communication decision-making. The vice provost shared how crisis management is coordinated through his office at University A:

We have a university incident command group which is drawn out of the central administration, key managers, public safety, emergency operations, our chief budget and operating officer, an associate provost representing the academic enterprise, and representatives from each of the schools. That really is the group that gets together if it’s a university-wide crisis or there’s a disruption in the city, for examples with the [city] unrests. We really depended, in those cases, on social media. We also have the Rave text messaging system to notify students.

As explained by the vice provost, the Rave system is “a mobile telephone emergency notification tool that sends text messages about critical alerts to student, faculty, staff, and parent subscribers” about emergent issues impacting the campus. During times of crisis, decisions about what and when to communicate fall to the emergency management incident commanders and can include email notification, website updates, and social media activity. The incident command serves as the hub of coordination during times of crisis. However, it relies heavily on a first-responder model, which in the case of University A falls most directly to public safety.

The director of public safety remarked that while his team manages the incident response, in concert with a host of other agencies and institutional actors, he is minimally involved in the dissemination of crisis communications. Communications and Media Relations centrally manage crisis communications at University A, with guidance and input from the emergency management incident command structure. All crisis communication, including mobile text messages, emails, web updates, and social media activity are crafted between thirty minutes and four-hours post-crisis. Public Safety may send a mobile text message only if there is imminent threats to the community and with
specific instructions for staying safe, a timely warning. The director of public safety noted that “timeliness typically falls somewhere in the middle because if somebody else outside the safety organization is crafting the message, they’re crafting it with guidance from above… and by the time that gets out, what kind of message are we really sending? Is it timely?” The director of public safety expressed concern about the lag between crisis occurrence and crisis communication and suggested that the influence of other offices was a contributing factor to the delay.

The director of public safety indicated that it was only during the recent civil unrest that the institution developed a standardized practice of posting the text of every crisis email or text message on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. He expressed that in previous positions, “crisis communications was under my control, so I had a lot more input as to how and what went out. Here, it’s under the communications office.”

The director of emergency management also plays a key role leveraging the resources of University A to respond to crisis situations and often becomes involved just after public safety and security staff. The director of emergency management referenced a corporate security communications approach as the foundation of notification in which “a series of canned messages where you just have to fill in the particulars, like a location or something… in the case of security alerts we have a template… it always starts with the template, there’s a consistent format to this and so communications just has to plug in the details.”

In the University A communications office, there was affirmation that crisis communication is created and disseminated internally. The executive director of media
relations shared that following the mass shooting at Virginia Tech, the university
developed an in-house tool to text and email campus constituents:

Recently we changed over from a homegrown, home designed system created by our IT people, which was good for its time, to a commercially available system called University A Alert, which is a more integrated approach. It allows us, from the same interface, to send text messages, email, we can post to Facebook or Twitter, we can post to our plasma screens on campus, we can post on our webpage all from that online application.

The executive director of media relations indicated that it was a priority to have consistent messaging with a coordinated locus of control. The executive director of media relations also confirmed that much of the crisis communication was reviewed and approved by key stakeholders in the Office of the President. This was particularly true during the recent protest and civil unrest activity.

A more detailed description of the crisis communication plan was shared by the executive director of media relations and was consistent with University A’s written crisis management documentation:

The way it would work in a physical crisis or a security type of matter is that public safety or security would be the first to know, and they would send the initial alert by text message. They would also alert the ICS [incident command structure] for the university. As soon as possible after the first we alert, we in communications will take over the communication. We would send subsequent alert updates, we will send an email, we certainly update both the website emergency page we have on the website, and the emergency phone line that we have.

The use of templates helps to expedite the myriad forms of communication used during a crisis. The executive director of media relations indicated that he “receives his marching orders from the incident command structure” and engages in frequent two-way communication to ensure clarity.
The executive director of media relations indicated that use of the institution’s primary web portal was its most important resource in social media crisis communication:

I tend to like what we do where I would rather point people to our own webpage. If you want information, go to this page, this is where you are going to find official and vetted communications from our emergency people. Just keep pointing them to that page because that is the greatest asset for us in terms of information validation I can trust. Our Twitter account isn’t even verified. I have no control over that. There’s even people who are doubting stuff that is coming out of our account. It’s just like how do you push past this? Even if we had a ton of information to release and out on Twitter, I would still sort of say, put it all on that emergency page and we will just push people to that page. That page shows it’s got the official university marking. It’s our office. We own it. It’s not a third party site like Twitter.

The lack of understanding of social media validation practices is indicative of the institutional culture at University A. The director of emergency management further explained that during an active crisis there is a physical separation between crisis communicators and other key crisis decision-makers:

[Building name], where the central administration, president, two senior VPs, the provost, and other leadership is far away from the university communications office. Their office is not even physically located on-campus – it is in a building like a half a mile away. This physical non-co-location in these [crisis] events leads to a lack of thinking which then delays. There is a ton of back and forth and every communication – social media or otherwise – must reflect the philosophies, values, style, and approach of the president and the institution. We are trying all of these words in to our communications.

The director of residential life suggests that the organizational culture at University A has not adapted to the speed and urgency with which social media communication is generated or expected.
University B Analysis

University B is a very large institution located in a major metropolitan area along the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. The main campus area (though it lacks a formal defined campus boundary) is located in the urban core of a city, with adjacent satellite medical centers, research institutes, and facilities spread throughout the region. There are over twenty schools and colleges affiliated with University B, enrolling near 60,000 students and employing 10,000 academic and 2500 administrative staff members. University B runs a large campus housing system, with over 12,000 graduate and undergraduate students. In addition, there are two international campuses, one located in the Middle East and the other located in Asia, with numerous other locations circling the globe.

At University B, key administrators were interviewed in functional areas that spanned public safety, emergency management, central administration, student affairs, communications and media relations, and social media. Additionally, a member of the faculty, a student, and the parent of an undergraduate student were included as participants. All interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes and conducted between September 14 and October 12, 2015, either in-person or via telephone. On social media, University B has nearly 540,000 Facebook “likes” and over 63,800 Twitter “followers.”

University B has experienced a variety of crisis situations that span its micro and macro communities. The operations manager responsible for public safety at University B identified myriad examples of crisis impacting his university in the eleven years he’s worked there:
I have been at [University B] for many crises. I recall 9/11, the blackout of 2003, Hurricane Irene, and Hurricane Sandy. We also had a building collapse in the neighborhood which was a big deal. We’ve dealt with a denial of service attack on our IT infrastructure, a series of student suicides, and significant protest activity.

As operations manager in public safety, he indicated a high level of preparation for other types of crisis situations including “pandemic disease, active shooter, we even think about earthquakes although we are not in a particularly active region for those.” The operations manager suggested that University B prepares for nearly every conceivable and inconceivable crisis that could or might impact institutional operations.

The director of emergency management at University B echoed a similar recollection of the types of emergency and crisis situations she has experienced at the institution:

I have been involved in a situation where a student was missing and was not found for over 48 hours… and then was found in the space between two buildings, lost. We have had suicides and suicide attempts – of students and faculty – loss of water and power from an event like Hurricane Sandy, weaponry, neighborhood disturbances, and a building explosion.

The director of emergency management also made reference to events that were urgent but that were not necessarily a crisis from the public safety perspective, but that had the potential to turn into reputational crises: “Sometimes it’s not a crisis; it’s just an event. Not all events are crises. We have a very long list in terms of what constitutes a crisis here – even something that’s happening abroad can turn into a crisis here.”

From the central administration perspective, many more events constitute a crisis at University B. The senior vice president remarked that crisis is not limited to events
that threaten the health, safety, or wellness of students, faculty, staff, and infrastructure – but that they are reputational as well:

They [crises] range from low-level residence hall issues to student deaths, either self-inflicted or student deaths by accident or tragedy. We deal with sexual assaults and missing students, fighting, violence, and natural disasters. We have campuses around the globe, so when there is an issue around the globe it can affect us depending on how close it is to a site of ours. Tel Aviv is probably the best example of that. When we had to close down our site mid semester and then bring students back and evacuate them by helicopter and airplane… and then there are those situations that occur and impact our campuses around [the city] that are not necessarily self-induced or student-induced, like the bomb that blew up a home right near our campus… those kind of things.

The senior vice provost spoke at length about a recent crisis that significantly impacted his campus, Hurricane Sandy. He differentiated Hurricane Sandy from other types of situations as there was time to plan for the storm and its impacts.

From the student affairs perspective at University B, the associate director of residence life indicated he has been involved in “…grandiose crises impacting the campus at large to individual and personal crises. They may be health related, they may be physical, they could impact a facility, or involve the entire campus if it involves weather, national disaster, terrorism or things like that.” Similarly, the senior director of residential life at University B posited that crisis at her institution encompasses a broad level of scenarios:

Some sort of facility emergencies, either weather related, hurricanes obviously, or manmade when the building blew up last year. The impact of weather on one or many of our buildings, as was the case with Hurricane Sandy, can be a real crisis. We’ve experienced crowds and protest situations, such as during a national political convention. There have been some incidents protesting various causes – crowds that impacted our residence halls and buildings and disrupted the flow of life and the university operations.
The staff in residence life both concurred that the colocation of the university in the city was a mitigating factor in types of crisis experienced.

The tenured faculty member at University B has experience at both the main campus and at a global campus site in Paris, France. This faculty member expressed that the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, which happened less than a week before his students were scheduled to arrive for the semester and Hurricane Sandy in the United States were the biggest types of crisis situations in which he has been involved. The faculty member expressed high levels of awareness of student mental health emergencies, campus crime, and weather-related events as other examples of urgent situations impacting the institution.

The associate director for global student affairs at University B, working in a satellite campus in the Middle East, noted that the crisis situations in which she was involved with were disparate and removed from that of the main campus. While there were many of the same crisis situations, particularly surrounding mental health, suicidal behaviors, and student conduct, the geo-cultural location changed the context of institutional crisis. The associate director for global affairs remarked that emergent issues on the University B main campus “trumped” crisis situations at her global campus location and that periods of confusion often ensued. An example of an operational difficulty in a global network university is a weather-related cancellation. The main campus location, in the northeastern United States, is prone to severe weather including snowstorms. As such, occasionally the university will alter its operational hours or cancel classes. The notification is pushed out through email, mobile text messages, websites, and social media. As affiliates of the institution, the students, faculty, and staff
members at the satellite campus receive this notification, even though their campus is not impacted and there are no changes to local operations. The associate director for global affairs described this phenomenon as a challenge for institutions with multiple locations, “We are a small fish in a larger pond and that creates challenges in coordination with [University B main campus].” The associate director for global affairs further explained that “a crisis at one location may not be a crisis at another” and that the events like Hurricane Sandy, while disruptive to the institution on the whole, was minimally impactful thousands of miles away. Conversely, the crises that impact her campus, such as sandstorms or geopolitical events, often do not register at the main campus. The associate director for global affairs also offered that from the student affairs perspective, social media is the fastest way to get a message out across the entire campus, especially through its associated geo-location tags.

From the communications perspective, numerous staff members were able to share perspectives about crisis at University B. The manager of web communications for the university-at-large, views crisis on a continuum, with small-scale crises that impact a small frame of campus, to “large scale response efforts, such as we saw during Hurricane Sandy, building fires, water main breaks… I have a range in terms of severity on individual level to broad scale impact.”

The senior director of communications at University B recalls the types of crisis she has observed as “…recently as Hurricane Sandy to the operational impacts of 9/11. So you have Sandy as a weather event – an act of God, or the east coast blackout in 2003, facilities emergencies, and the explosion near campus last year.” The marketing communications manager and the social media communications manager concurred. The
marketing communications manager shared that University B is well-versed in crisis situations:

We’ve had experience with hurricanes, snowstorms, and then external to campus like national tragedies. Hurricane Sandy was a huge disruption to the [University B] community. We’ve had snow days and beyond that, during the Boston Marathon bombing, there was a disruption and increased security. Recently there was an explosion near campus that caused the evacuation of several academic and residence hall buildings.

The social media communications manager added that there were several issues of protest activity impacting campus operations but that Hurricane Sandy was the biggest disruption to impact University B since 9/11.

The student and parent interviewed at University B, both affiliated with the class of 2016, articulated that Hurricane Sandy and the building explosion near campus were of the most disruptive crisis with which they were familiar. The parent suggested that Hurricane Sandy was a unique experience and that “University B did an excellent job of communicating,” but that during the building explosion, which was an unexpected event, “I was pretty pissed off at [University B]. We waited and waited.” The student remarked that while the explosion was a “big deal,” the biggest crisis she experienced was Hurricane Sandy: “I mean my main priority was telling my parents I was okay – and then figuring out what do for the week because we had no water or anything. I didn’t have any internet. I had nothing, so I couldn’t even really connect.”

**University B Crisis Planning**

At University B, crisis management is the primary responsibility of public safety and emergency management, with significant oversight from university communications and executive-level staff in the office of the president and provost. When an incident is
reported and public safety responds, the operations manager, the public safety operations manager or designee may send mobile text message and email to all university affiliates informing the community of the need to shelter-in-place or to avoid trafficking a certain geographic area. Any additional communications, either email, mobile, web, or social media, must be referred to central university communications for authorship and approval.

At the central university communications office, the manager of web communications affirmed this process as paramount to protecting health and safety:

    Public safety uses the emergency text messages to get the message out no matter how messy it is. They just get it out to keep people safe from a critical health, wellness, or safety situation. And then my office, university communications and public affairs, immediately goes to the scene to establish, with public safety and local authorities, to get the kind of information needed to coordinate additional responses.

The University maintains a crisis coordination team that gathers with representatives from the administrative and academic enterprise. The communications team is a central component of this working group and serves as the official internal and external coordinators of all crisis outreach. The manager of web communications also shared that “Twitter is the one that gets the message out fast and does get it to the whole audience.”

The social media team at University B, consisting of the senior director of communications, the marketing communications manager, and the social media communications manager, indicated that their role is to “gather information – while central communications is putting out the emails or texts, we are the second tier.” The senior director of communications offered that “…we let them crack the initial message and then we release our message on social media.” As such, critical information in
protection of health and safety is pushed out immediately to university affiliates via email and mobile text messages. Public acknowledgment and follow-up, through social media and other public venues, requires an additional layer of approval and oversight, slightly delaying the speed with which messages are delivered in this manner. However, University B maintains a series of pre-written social media postings, to which unique information can be quickly added and summarily posted.

The institutional culture with regards to social media crisis communication at University B is buffered by regular use of established social media activity. The associate director of global student affairs believed that social media “is a space in which student culture is established” and that “the institution builds rapport with its audience right away. If you only use it [social media] in crisis, people may come to it, but mainly they won’t look at it as an immediate reference.” The operations manager for public safety posited that the integration of social media into the digital communication culture at University B easily allows for messaging to reach “90% of the intended audience. It’s sort of like for the last 10%, we rely on some word of mouth.”

University C Analysis

University C is a very large private university located in a major urban area in the Pacific southwest basin. The 300-acre main campus is joined by several adjacent research and medical enterprise facilities several miles away. There are over 40,000 students enrolled in its 22 colleges and schools. A workforce of 4,000 academic and 13,000 administrative staff members round out its population. The campus is residential on the undergraduate level and is currently undergoing rapid expansion with the acquisition and development of a large swath of land adjacent to its core.
At University C, key administrators were interviewed in functional areas that spanned public safety, emergency management, central administration, student affairs, communications and media relations, and social media. Additionally, a member of the faculty, a student, and the parent of an undergraduate student were included as participants. All interviews were scheduled for 60 minutes and conducted between September 28 and October 7, 2015, either in-person or via telephone. On social media, University C has 216,000 “likes” on Facebook and over 80,000 “followers” on Twitter.

At University C, the director of emergency management indicated that crisis on his campus was a daily occurrence, but that the magnitude of crisis varied greatly:

Earthquakes, fires, civil disturbances, mass shootings on campus, crime waves, power outages, flooding – we have just about almost everything, except tornados. And we really don’t have hurricanes either. I would say that we have 10 crises a day, at this university. I often joke with my friends that we’re trying to keep 40,000 18 to 23 year olds safe. Imagine what a nightmare it is when you’re trying to deal with keeping them safe.

The fire safety and emergency planning specialist indicated that the biggest crisis he worries about is an earthquake, but that “fires, power outages, flooding, civil unrest, and crime” are also prepared for with great fervor. The business continuity specialist added that a recent power outage and the shooting of a student on campus was the most complicated crisis she had dealt with. The power outage, which affected numerous buildings housing critical research functions, was a crisis that had enormous financial implications from lost research revenue. The business continuity specialist further shared that the shooting was a significant wellness, safety, and reputational crisis “and I think was the biggest incident we’ve dealt with and hopefully we’ll never have to again.” The Chief of Public Safety at University C added that crisis on his campus must also include
student issues and concerns, such as violence and mental health, in addition to the
aforementioned incidents.

The vice president for administration at University C shared that he oversees
campus safety, health and wellness initiatives, and the facilities infrastructures. In his
tenure, he has experienced “…a student homicide, earthquakes – not disastrous, but big
enough to where we got a group together quickly to do a facilities survey, urban riots, and
active shooters.” An academic dean added that the impact of neighborhood violence has
spilled onto campus. A tenured faculty member interviewed offered that campus crime
was the issue that most concerned her in the crisis perspective. This faculty member also
shared that “…a couple of murders, actually more than a couple, were recent issues, but
that because it’s an open campus and people can walk on. There’ve been situations
where you have people who look like they’re not supposed to be hanging around…” The
openness of University C remained a constant theme in crisis situations as explained by
affiliated participants.

From the student affairs perspective, crisis can be defined as anything, perceived
or real, that impacts students. The vice president for student affairs offered a litany of
health, wellness, facilities, disasters, and crimes that rounded her perceptions of crisis at
University C:

Oh my goodness! What have I not seen? But what I have seen is pretty
much everything. But I’m always told that just when you think you’ve
seen it all, something else is going to show up. Everything from campus
shootings, to students who have passed away due to being murdered, to
horrific car accidents, to a Norovirus that took down about 700 students in
two weekends in university owned residence halls and fraternity houses –
I’ve seen a lot of different things over the years.
The staff in residence life affirmed this assessment in a group interview. The assistant director for residence life recalled “student death, sexual assaults, robberies, bicycle accidents, pedestrian/vehicle and crashes, fires, floods, skateboard accidents, mental health, and substance related hospitalizations.” The director of residence life added that “campus crime and natural disasters are the greatest concerns” at University C.

The director of media relations and communications and the social media manager added that student death, earthquakes, transit related incidents, and violence around campus occupied the majority of their crisis related experience. The impact of national and global events was also preeminent in their work. The director of media relations and communications suggested that crisis is no longer limited by strict physical boundaries, “as breaking news elsewhere, globally, can have immediate and local repercussions.”

The student and parent perspective indicated cognition, but not concern about most crisis situations, with the exception of campus crime. The student indicated that he was not really aware of any significant crisis situations on campus, but is a frequent recipient of safety alerts, “usually about some crime or someone did something stupid and had something stolen from them.” He did suggest that protests associated with “Black Lives Matter” occurred adjacent to campus “and I was told to stay away from a major intersection that had been taken over by protestors.” The parent participant expressed great concern about campus crime and appreciation for quick institutional responses:

Well I know the area is considered to be a dangerous area, and there are a lot of parents that fear sending their students to [University C]. And even the area right around the university is very, well it’s very well policed. It’s
safe. I mean the kids are instructed that you don’t walk alone. You know you can’t – and the kids are well educated on that. But there is a lot of fear among the parents, particularly on Facebook. But [University C] does a good job of sending out alerts. I remember during my son’s first year there was a fire on campus, actually in his dorm. They handled it so quickly – the alert went out and I knew even before my son told me.

The focus on managing the complexities of urban living, such as crime and environmental factors, like fires, was a recurrent theme at University C.

University C Crisis Planning

At University C, public safety is the primary crisis responder, with secondary support from the emergency management team. The senior responding officer from public safety is both authorized and mobile-equipped to send immediate emergency notification to university affiliates in protection of the health and safety of the community. There is no additional oversight or management of this type of communication. The chief of police remarked that the process at his institution is quite different from others:

Most universities, they require a high level of approval to put out a mass notification in an emergency message. Our sergeants can put out an alert. We put out more alerts than probably most universities. It’s not that we have more incidents, it is just that our student population and community demanded it of us. Most of the time, when an alert goes out, I have not received internal notification. I am finding out about it at the same time – and that’s how it should be. I don’t have to know. I just need to know that my people are well trained and they know when to do it. I am comfortable that this is what works best for us. It may not work best for other universities, but for us, we are customer focused, and our customers have made it clear that they want to get these notifications. We don’t get beat up for putting out too many. We get beat up when the students living in the area know something is going on and we didn’t put something out.

These alerts can be automatically shared via the institutions formal social media channels, enhancing the reach and impact of the messages.
This sentiment was shared by the vice president for administration, who remarked that the University C has a finely tuned emergency management apparatus, with drill teams and a coordinated and mindful response. Coordinated in the emergency operations center, the administrative team that responds to crisis would rather meet the needs of constituents by offering more messages than take criticism for not sending a text, email, or crafting a social media post when one might have been warranted. The communications and social media staff members at University C articulated that there was a high level of activity in their work related to crisis. The director of media relations and communications indicated that public safety was responsible for authoring and sending any urgent messages that conveyed immediate directives in the protection of health or safety. The social media further explained this position and asserted that their “…crisis communications approach appends the [University C] mobile texts and email alerts. Public safety sends first and we follow-up. This is a shared responsibility. We have a few extra moments to think before putting out useful information.”

The director of emergency planning suggested that crisis communication must continuously adapt to the changing demographics and technologies:

I just think the only thing to me that you can do, looking forward… but I just think you have to remain flexible and resilient and stay on your toes. You must be constantly vigilant. And I think you certainly have to drill for every conceivable scenario to drill for, because it may happen. In this environment, we look guilty if we are not transparent – and if we don’t talk about it [on social media], someone else will.

Cross-Case Analysis

To make meaning across the three case studies, the following cross-case analysis looks at themes that emerged between and across the sites. The mobilization of this
information, consisting of comparisons and contrasts, helps to explain site-specific outcomes.

**Social Media Usage During Crisis**

The selection of social media platforms as a crisis communication tool was fairly consistent between the three participating institutions. Twitter was used most often by the institutions to convey “breaking news,” colloquially defined as emergent issues or high priority information. The director of social media at University A indicated that, “I think people turn to Twitter in times of breaking news and crisis.” Similarly, the senior director of communications at University B suggested that in an immediate crisis situation, “…we’ll jump quickly online and use Twitter to tweet information relevant to the concern.” The marketing communications manager at University B defined social media selection from two camps; “social media content sharing platforms” and “social media dumps.” Social media dumps are “…places of content storage, like YouTube, Spotify or Pinterest, where content can be uploaded and shared externally.” He University B differentiated “social media content sharing platforms” as places “…that are good for disseminating information as they have built in interaction,” like Twitter. In a crisis, the social media communications manager at University B offered that “for real time updates, what we’ve done in the past when crises do occur in real time, the ‘right now’ updates are going to be on Twitter,” as it is the easiest and most streamlined way to share short bursts of content.

The director of emergency planning at University C commented that “the main challenge in emergency communication is you need to get something out there within minutes or seconds. And I mean you need to post something even before the situation is
neutralized. You have to put something up because this can all happen so fast.”

University A’s director of social media shared that with crisis he used to have “hours before we had to publicly acknowledge it, now I have minutes before a student or community member posts something.” The landscape for crisis communication has changed and universities are obligated to communicate early and often.

The social media manager at University C shared that her institution automatically links Twitter to its emergency alert notifications: “In a crisis, the first and most immediate platform that we’re using is Twitter. University C’s social media director further defined Twitter’s utility:

> Twitter has grown into breaking news that way. And really, in some ways, it started out that way. We’ve kind of trained our students to realize that when we’re going to talk about breaking news in crisis, it’s generally going to go on Twitter. We can always put in a link if we need to share more information [than 140 characters].

The character limitation, from the perspective of the director of media relations and communications at University C, is one of Twitter’s greatest assets, for it offers a quick solution to a complicated and scary matter. The director of social media shared that at University A, it was common practice for students to copy and paste text message security alerts into Twitter, as both text and tweets share the same character limits.

Yet at times, institutions may need to communicate more than 140 characters. There is also awareness that effective crisis communication relies upon multiple modalities to achieve message saturation. As such, the second most-replied upon social media platform for crisis management, as shared by participants, was Facebook. The strategy for Facebook utilization at University A was shaped by a social media mishap several years ago, in which a shooter at an affiliated institutional hospital opened fire and
shot a medical doctor working in the facility. The executive director of media relations reflected that the experience taught him the role that Facebook must play in effective crisis management:

The doctor was shot. Technically, this had nothing to do with the main campus of the university, except that the doctor was affiliated with the larger institution, an employee. It happened on hospital property, that hospital was part of a separate corporation from the university. Our colleagues in medicine were in charge of the communications and as far as I was concerned, also in charge of the social media aspect of it. What I didn’t really take into consideration was that the rest of the world doesn’t know that there’s a separation between the hospital and the university.

Moreover, the director of social media at University A shared that while the university eventually posted a short blurb on Twitter, the institution’s Facebook page made no mention of the incident:

Our Facebook account really didn’t carry anything about this. What we should have done is posted something like “To follow this event, go to the [University A] medicine account.” There was definitely a feeling that people expected us to be posting to social media and were disappointed that we weren’t.

The use of Facebook was described as helpful for reaching myriad university audiences. Specifically, the executive director of media relations at University A indicated that parents, in particular, rely on Facebook rather than Twitter to access critical information about university operations. This was particularly true, he mentioned, during the civil unrest in the city.

At University B, even though Twitter is perceived to be the most effective social media tool for crisis communication from the institutional perspective, the manager of web communications indicated that Facebook remains the largest audience and preferred platform for most constituents:
So the biggest audience we have is on Facebook and it’s the best one for emergency contacts and emergency postings, because we can post the information in both the small and long format in the Facebook post, and we can pin it at the top. We can also boost the post if we need to make sure that it reaches the full audience. We can more easily comment and react and see those comments from an administrative standpoint.

Moreover, the marketing communications manager at University B indicated that Facebook is used when there is a need to share richer content: “If there’s a need for more information, it goes on Facebook, just because it’s the nature of how Facebook works. Facebook is our go-to, particularly because we can pin things to the top.”

At University C, Facebook is used to both complement and supplement crisis postings on Twitter. The social media manager claimed that the information and social media content on Facebook offered a different perspective, and often a different audience.

As part of our crisis practice, we turn to Facebook as a secondary, more in-depth kind of platform. Because it’s more in-depth, it takes more time to get information out to Facebook. Usually, we use Facebook when a situation is kind of bigger. If it’s something that’s lasting a little longer, we would start turning to Facebook.

The ability to infuse more information on Facebook than on Twitter is often a key asset for communicating in an intergenerational community.

At University A, the executive director of media relations and the social media manager remarked that the selection of Twitter and Facebook as the primary platforms for social media crisis communication was unintentional, and resulted from user, rather than institutional preferences. The University A provost office chief of staff indicated that while younger community members were comfortable on Twitter and its associated shorthand, parents and faculty members were more likely to use Facebook – particularly
because of an institutionally-affiliated parent Facebook page on which critical communications exist. The chief of staff posited that the establishment of a smaller affinity page on Facebook “…helped to keep parents active and engaged – this community views social media communication as essential and they are in most need of engagement.” This was also the experience at University C. The parent shared that she turns to Facebook, even before looking at official university email or text announcements:

I just use Facebook and so does most of my peer group. I’m not on other social media sites like SnapChat or Vine. I don’t need to be doing all that and my peer group doesn’t really get into that, no offense, so there is no way. I like the [University C] Facebook page as a forum for parents.

The speed with which parents can access information was identified as an asset by the parent at University C particularly because she knew where to look and didn’t have to “search a website or remember where to look.”

The student interviewed at University A suggested that the admissions office deserves some credit for social media crisis communication because his initial social media experience was rooted in his acceptance letter. He recalled that “the admissions and orientation teams do a good job in the admissions process by establishing a presence on Facebook that carries on for orientation and beyond. I often look there because I’ll see something before it hits my email or text.” The student at University B offered that recently Wi-Fi servers at her school “went down” and that her knowledge about the outage came first from Twitter: “I first got wind of it when I was trying to log into the [University B] student portal and I couldn’t. I looked on Twitter and saw that all students were complaining about it, so I knew it wasn’t just me. Something was up.” The student
at University C commented that his generation “doesn’t like to read emails. Well, maybe from a professor, but not really from an administrator. If you want to get a message to me, text it. It has to be by text. I’ll see a text first and then I’ll look on Twitter to get more information.”

**Social Media Themes**

Several social media themes emerged at the participating institutions that further define the process by which social media is used as a crisis communication tool. The implementation of a social media crisis communication strategy relies heavily on speed, hashtags, engagement, and other human factors.

**Expediency vs. Accuracy**

At each of participating institutions, a variety of crisis situations impacted the normal operations of the university environment. At University A, the most salient example of crisis was the recent civil unrest that impacted the city and forced the cancellation of classes and a lockdown of the campus. At University B, the impacts of Hurricane Sandy and a building explosion were often referred to as the prime examples of recent crises impacting the campus and its students. At University C, city and campus crime present the most challenging of crises to the institutional constituents. In each of these scenarios, there exists a prescient expectation that without haste, there is both emergency notification via mobile text message or email and immediate social media activity.

The choice to automatically link emergency notification mechanisms to social media is different at each of the sites in this study. At University C, a decision was made to enable automatic and immediate social media activity on Twitter when a campus
safety alert message is triggered. The chief of police at University C expressed that the goal is message saturation and that social media serves to compliment the text and email notification. Specifically, the chief of police always prefers expedient and accurate communication:

Keep accuracy over speed, most of the time. I know there are some situations where expediency matters more… you have got to get something out there because otherwise safety is going to be jeopardized. But I would say that in our case and from my experience, that’s the exception. It doesn’t happen enough to really alter a whole bunch. Accuracy usually is a priority because again, we are telling people to do certain things. In our business, most of what is happening could be crime related, could be safety related. It has got to be accurate and you have got to wait and give things a little bit of time before you start giving directions and giving definitive decisions that direct people to do certain things.

Institutions grapple with the constituent demand to know now and the decision about who actually needs to know what and when. The chief of staff at University A indicated that while expediency is critical, accuracy must be maintained, particularly since most of the social media activity generated about crisis related to crimes, active or resolved.

The director of emergency planning at University C had a different perspective. He argued that speed and accuracy are linked and that an institution cannot offer one without the other:

You have to get something posted fast. Really fast. Within 10 minutes. As long as it’s accurate information, it doesn’t matter what it is. I mean, we talked about, for example, when the big one hits or when there is a major crime, we’re going to get something on social media immediately. If you leave a vacuum, someone else will fill it.

This fear that the locus of control will shift away from university agents to those without the proper knowledge or context is part of operating in an open-source and unregulated technological space. The director of emergency planning at University C articulated an
understanding of the lack of rules of engagement and indicated his preference for owning early social media content, with the hopes that it will reign supreme over subsequent postings from others.

Public safety at University B expressed a preference for accuracy over speed. Concerned that in many crisis situations, the first reports often lack vital pieces of information, the operations manager commented that emergency notification must be carefully constructed:

Expedience is the priority when matters of immediate health or safety are concerned, when you want to get stuff out there, without delay to the broad audience. Beyond that, you want, I think, careful communication… we spend a lot of time on word choice and work towards improving our messages. It drives some people nuts and I would say boldly that in most developing situations, the facts are fluid and change rapidly. There can be differences between public safety and public affairs, but accuracy can remain a question mark for hours or even a day depending on what the incident was.

With Hurricane Sandy, the crisis was expected, which offered time for partnership between the two campus agencies. University B’s director of emergency management mentioned that significant planning went into the development of the social media activity for Hurricane Sandy, “…we knew it was coming, obviously, and we have a very robust protocol to deal with hurricanes. So we made preparations with [public affairs] and we coordinated to get all of the information up on our Facebook and Twitter pages.”

In contrast, with an explosion at a building adjacent to campus, there was no time to prepare for a thoughtful coordinated message campaign.

The public safety operations manager at University B added that in a developing crisis situation, “it is most effective to communicate across a broad set of channels” and that social media fills a critical role in real-time message distribution. He suggested that
“defined workflows, where the public relations division gets contacted and can jump straight into action without the need for additional approvals” to post items on the website and social media is how urgent crisis materials are shared on Facebook and Twitter and worked well during the building explosion.

At University A, social media is not well integrated into outgoing crisis communications. The director of public safety offered that any social media activity requires multiple levels and layers of approval, including the commanding officer in public safety, the executive director of media relations and crisis communications, and the communications officer in the office of the president. Moreover, because crisis communications is almost wholly a process maintained by the central communications office, and not public safety, the director of public safety shared with frustration that “the message is often crafted with guidance from above.” During the civil unrest, the executive director of media relations remarked that speed and accuracy were of equal importance:

I think the first thing that I learned is that even if you don’t know what the hell is going on you get a placeholder out there to say, “we know something is going on and we will get back to you as soon as we can.” Just no radio silence, but at least something saying, “We are aware of reports. We are checking. We will get back to you.”

This helps to bridge the institutional culture, which is very protective its reputation during crisis situations.

The chief of staff in the provost’s office remarked that reputational management was concern for social media crisis communication decisions at University A:

Almost always, I think in fact, we go for the accuracy... it takes forever, forever, to get the message out around here, to the point of... it’s very frustrating. And because everyone is very concerned about reputational
image, “can we get it right, do we say this?” and I’m sitting there… going, I need to send a message out. Because the worst thing we can do at this moment and time is actually wait. We just need to go. If there is an error in it, we can fix it. We need to go.

This tension between speed and accuracy makes the utility of social media as a crisis communication tool less reliable.

The director of emergency management at University A indicated that the institution’s leadership lacked the social media savvy to truly understand its value as a vehicle for sharing critical information about crisis:

But social media is not really about taking time, and so I think the biggest challenge, and it’s a combination of a cultural shift on the part of leadership, but it’s also really a skill set shift. Because a traditional communications person doesn’t get paid to crank out great stuff quickly, they get paid to carefully crank out this stuff. We’re totally struggling with that. But the ethos here so far is, like if you actually look at how we do crisis communications, we err on the side of caution rather than on the side of speed. Frankly, I’m not happy with it. I don’t think we’re trying to, in this cultural environment, embrace the reality of social media.

The director of emergency management further commented that the back and forth of crisis communication and social media activity is indicative of the fact that “…we’re very late to social media because we are not focused there, and we’re not set up to be quick in the sense of checks and balances in the word-smithing.” University A’s vice provost acknowledged the role of institutional culture and hesitancy in fully using social media technologies. He acknowledged, “I don’t think we use [social media] to its fullest in doing crisis communication with students, and we’re currently looking at how to better depend on social media. The civil disruption in the city, for example, showed us this need.”
Social media requires a constant input of information. The manager of web communications at University B stated that the initial social media posting is only part of a much larger strategy for integrating social media into crisis communication plans. The web communications manager suggested that “…in social media there’s an expectation about how frequently you’re going to get an update from a situation that is slow moving, and we’re struggling with, how do we internally want to respond?” The web communications manager further indicated that depending on the situation, follow-up information should come at regularly expected intervals – every 30 minutes or every hour. He considered it prudent to identify a realistic time frame in which updates would be posted to social media – even if there was nothing to new to say. The web communications manager valued this established practice as a way of ensuring the continuity of institutional messaging and affirming the university as the go-to for accurate information.

Many of the student affairs staff members at the participating institutions relied heavily on institutional social media activity to share timely information about campus crisis with their student constituents. The associate director of residential life at University B indicated that it was during Hurricane Sandy that the true power of timely social media activity and relevant follow-up emerged:

Social media during Superstorm Sandy, in particular, was the best mode because some students could use their phone wirelessly. They didn’t have cell service but you could use the Wi-Fi network. Students weren’t able to receive the university texts and email service was spotty. But Facebook and Twitter were really, really helpful.

The social media communications manager also indicated that University B was forced to rely on social media, in particular Twitter and Facebook, once the storm had passed to
notify residential students of residence hall closing and reopening – that internal networks were not operable. A similar concept is in existence at University C, where social media is built into the crisis management communication plan as a redundancy during earthquake or other large scale disasters, should localized networks be rendered inoperable.

Student Affairs staff also indicated that students expected dynamic institutional communication in which information and care was expressed and offered. University B’s global student affairs associate director suggested that “crisis email is too one-dimensional – especially if it comes from someone who will not respond.” The senior director of communications at University B noted that social media provides an immediate insight into student reactions and can be utilized to “gauge what’s happening – are students scared or frustrated? What is the general sense and reaction amongst the student body?”

The students, parents, and faculty members interviewed reflected on their roles as recipients of social media crisis communication. The faculty member interviewed at University B noted that it took several hours for the institution to post information about the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, aggravated by the trans-Atlantic separation and time difference. He recalled that once the initial posting was made on Twitter and Facebook, a flurry of activity commenced, assuring students and parents of the safety of the site and its study abroad participants. This faculty member also recalled that during both the building explosion and Hurricane Sandy, his first encounter with crisis communication was through text and email, but that all subsequent information was easier viewed through University B’s Facebook and Twitter pages.
The faculty members interviewed at both University A and University C also expressed a preference for email and text notification, with a formal reference and link to a standing university-wide emergency website as their preferred vehicle for crisis communication. However, both of these faculty members understood that the generation of students and parents served by their respective universities expected immediate social media activity. As recalled by the interviewed student at University B, “…it takes a long time for things like emails and texts to reach us. A tweet will be sent instantly to whoever wants it, whereas it might take like sixty or ninety minutes for all of us to get the text or email.”

The director of social media stated that when University A makes a decision to share crisis information through social media, as was the case during the civil unrest and protests, it always includes a stable URL to link to the university’s emergency management website, often by using a micro or mini URL generator to limit the number of characters used. The director of social media further offered that when the decision was made to cancel classes, the information was “posted on our social media channels,” but that the richest content and description was centrally housed on the main emergency website.

University B also shares a standard URL link to its established emergency website in all of its social media postings. However, the manager of web communications recalled a denial of service attack on university servers that temporarily shut down all affiliated websites: “We try to always include the URL to the website… but anything that was connected digitally to [the University B domain] was not available.” The web
communications manager commented that this twist required a change in the pre-written social media templates.

University C’s director of media relations and communications shared that his institution relies heavily on standard university emergency websites as links in all of its social media crisis communication, adding that this adds authenticity and validity to the message:

Our social media communications are all pretty much the same, but tailored to their different formats. It really is trying to reach everyone. That’s why we have Twitter automatically connected to the [University C emergency alerts]. We do, however, have to manually update the emergency website.

By immediately linking social media activity to the emergency website, the director of media relations and communications suggested that interim updates and more enriched content could be managed with greater efficiency and that social media is used to drive traffic to a single point of digital entry. As such, greater care is given to the emergency website and its content, with social media activity on Facebook and Twitter used to affirm authenticity and provide direction to official resources.

Validity and authenticity are significant institutional concerns during crisis situations. The chief of staff at University A, the director of emergency management and the senior director of communications at University B, and the director of media relations and communications at University C each indicated that it was a priority to ensure that the institution was speaking with one voice. To ensure validity of social media activity, University B’s senior director of communications suggested that, “…there is a clear missive – if central communications did not say it, nothing is to be said. That is the only way we feel the messaging can be consistent.” The chief of staff at University A said that
central communications must be “the hub with which all activity commences” and even though she is frustrated by the complexities of this bureaucratic process, she is “…comforted to know that the structure is given holistic consideration,” that decisions are not made in a vacuum. In each of the institutions, all social media crisis communication was shared through the primary and verified institutional social media accounts and retweeted/shared through sub-institutional accounts and through the personal accounts of students, faculty members, staff members, parents, and other community members.

**Hashtags**

The language of social media relies heavily on unique text indicators to convey subject or topical considerations. During both non-crisis communication and in crisis communication, University A stated that their strategy did not consider the impact of a hashtag. The director of social media claimed that the strict 140-character limit on Twitter precluded him from “wasting space on a hashtag.” However, executive director of media communications asserted that while the institution might not publish hashtags, it certainly used them in the monitoring of crisis situations as a way to track responses.

University B and University C rely heavily upon hashtags to convey crisis messaging through social media. University C implemented a standard hashtag that appears in all crisis social media activity, consisting of the university’s public and recognizable three letter abbreviation and the world “alert.” This serves as a public and recognizable indicator that the affiliated message may be authentic. University B will use its public three letter abbreviation and, as was the case during Hurricane Sandy, a descriptor “#Sandy” to convey with greater specificity the topic of the posting. The
senior director of communications at University B suggested that the three letter abbreviation offered the best solution: “I think we’re really just minding the characters we can – we’re always using [University B Abbreviation] so we can track and see how it is being used.”

The students interviewed seemed to have the greatest familiarity with social media hashtags and made a point to look for them during crisis situations. The student interviewed indicated that she will search for [University B 3 letter abbreviation] in social media search fields when looking for information during a crisis, as she did during Hurricane Sandy. Another student shared that hashtags provided immediate access to information and that it was common to see the official University C Tweets or Facebook postings shared with student-added commentary or hashtags.

A concern shared by both the social media director and executive director of communications at University A is that a hashtag is not a guarantee of validity. The social media and communications staff at University A indicated that any Facebook or Twitter user can add any hashtag to any posting, diluting the efficiency of the message. The director of social media indicated that “keywords and hashtags, especially permutations of the university’s name, cannot be controlled.”

Hashtags do, however, offer institutional social media monitors a unique opportunity to track the viral nature of crisis communications posted through platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Both of the communications staff members interviewed at University A noted that their office uses two aggregator programs to scan for institutional hashtags, receiving an email summary every 4 hours. The social media director indicated that this technology, called “Hoot Suite and Radian6” afforded his office the ability to
rapidly identify in real-time the success of University A’s social media activity and how its audience was receiving and interacting with the crisis messaging.

The web communications manager and the senior director of communications also shared a similar technological capacity at University B: “We have the software set up. We would look up for the hashtag [University B abbreviation] or other key words. And very quickly we will watch the conversations unfold online.”

University C indicated that social media is monitored in much the same way. The social media manager explained that the software affords both a qualitative and a quantitative look at how social media messages are being received in real-time:

We have looked at the analytics. One of the interesting things is that during crisis, they spike. They spike right around the time through retweets and page use… We see that people are really using it. The experiential or qualitative part is useful, but the quantitative measures offer the most useful feedback.

Used in conjunction with the proprietary analytic tools contained within both Facebook and Twitter, the social media manager was able to see, live, the number of times a message was read, shared, retweeted, posted, and commented on. This information was triangulated through the social media content aggregators to generate key words, patterns, and behaviors relevant to University C.

**Social Media Engagement**

One of the intended outcomes of social media analytics is the ability to understand how social media activity is being received and interpreted by constituents. At each of the participating institutions, there was a shared history of evolution in how social media engagement developed.
Active Response

In its original construct, social media was used by the participating institutions as a way to push out or share critical information during a time of crisis. As the vice provost of University A noted, “Historically there was not much engagement, back and forth, between recipients and the institution.” Social media was technologically designed to foster an equal exchange of ideas and information, but human resource and other mitigating factors limited the institutional utility to one-way communication. The chief of staff shared that University A actively monitors social media, but that it “often lacks the commitment of resources required to fully engage in this space.” The executive director of media relations stated that he lacks the technical skill to fully monitor crisis-related social media activity and perform his critical job functions. The director of social media charged with implementing and monitoring social media communication acknowledged that crisis communication was hard to gauge:

I think even though I’m the social media manager, I still think the most guaranteed way to reach people is through text message and email. If the only way we had to reach people was through social media, I would be worried, because it’s very imperfect and very incomplete. My point is, I think what I’ve learned is, it isn’t just about speed that is important. It’s about being responsive. There are students, young people, trying to engage on Twitter with the university to get information. I’ve learned that I have to be responsive to them without appearing defensive or argumentative.

While the director of social is aware of the myriad social media activity at his institution with regards to crisis, he indicated that he’s only able to keep active tabs on some of it: “Usually, sometimes, I will miss stuff because, even with the monitoring software, it is like trying to look for needles in haystacks.” University A staff members indicated an awareness of the need to respond to and engage with community members, but lack the
institutional resources and support to do so. The director of emergency management expressed concern that while correcting rumors and misinformation is important, “given the environment… the engagement would have to go through the same word-smithing cycle and approvals as any other outgoing communication.” In essence, social media engagement during crisis is just as tightly controlled as the primary posting.

University B’s approach to social media crisis communication focuses on active engagement and participation. The public safety operations manager recalled that when social media crisis communication was first introduced, it was viewed as a one-way tool, designed to help public safety and public affairs share critical pieces of information. However, as the technology has changed and as the administrative savvy has increased, the practicality of social media into a two-way communications process has emerged.

The senior director of residential life shared that her current understanding of social media during crisis was rooted in two-way communications, “…at the central level, we watch what’s being posted and what’s being responded to. We definitely have responded to students to correct misconceptions that they have. There are a couple of times that we felt students were being somewhat inappropriate and we directly outreached to them.”

The marketing communications manager further clarified University B’s position on social media engagement during times of crisis by arguing for engagement when there is no crisis:

For example, when we were announcing a snow day, once we posted the official university announcement, we will do an additional post that’s sent out just to kind of play off that [original posting] and make it a little lighter. We’ll talk about ‘don’t slip’ or ‘stay warm’ and exchange pleasantries with students posting messages about the weather-related cancellation.
This light-hearted approach serves to “encourage engagement” and foster the idea that
“social media is a very useful tool and has really changed the way we live our lives” and
can be used for good. The social media manager at University B indicated that she views
social media crisis communication as a “conversation” and should include questions and
answers.

The senior director of communications further clarified University B’s position on
active engagement in crisis through social media by encouraging traditional
communication through new modalities:

I think the thing we are proudest of is that we are putting it all out there. We’ve lit a
match and encouraged central communications to take more risks [in social media crisis
communication]. In years past they said, “shut off all comments, you can’t comment” —
everything had to one way on social media. They wanted information to go out and that’s it.
Very traditional. And we [the social media team] wanted to engage. We wanted to connect
students with each other and connect them to the university. So it was disruptive. It was
very disruptive. But it also enabled us to convince our colleagues to think outside of the
box once they understood the impact.

The senior director of communications indicated that the ability to build community,
even in times of crisis, and to train students and community members to seek engagement
with the official university social media pages rather than with outside sources has
proven itself as a successful crisis management strategy for University B.

The web communications manager outlined University B’s social media crisis
management evolution as one that has moved from broadcast to engagement:

We didn’t engage, because there was no person that could monitor and
engage effectively. In the last few years there’s been a shift in terms of
the university’s stance on social media and its importance. There’s now
personal resources available that are not a part of the immediate
information alert and emergency communications team. They’re trained
to respond to emergencies by going to watch the social networks and to
engage. They don’t post in the normal sense, but they watch the comments. They help to aggregate common questions and reinforce messages, clear up rumors, point to resources. So during Hurricane Sandy, most everyone in the communications team at large had lost internet or power. I was one of the only people on my team that still had it. So I literally was watching all the comments trying to calm parents.

He also maintained that Hurricane Sandy was a game changer and has forever altered the university’s perception about social media engagement as a crisis management and mitigation tool. University B’s web communications manager, University A’s director of social media, and University C’s vice president for student affairs all remarked that misinformation was often the result of social media activity constructed by non-affiliates or “trolls,” high level social media users who sow discord, start arguments and intentionally upset online community members.

At University C, engagement is also a priority, particularly when it involves gossip, rumors or misinformation. The vice president for student affairs shared that “…when misinformation is posted, if there’s an opportunity for us to correct it, we will. We cannot obviously tell somebody what to post, because their perception is theirs and they have the right to share it. But we would probably make every effort to have an online or offline conversation with the person about the accuracy of their information.” The vice president remarked that student affairs is often asked to serve in this role, particularly when the post is generated by a parent or student.

The assistant director of residential life and the two residential area supervisors interviewed, each work directly with residential students at University C. These staff members indicated that social media provides another opportunity for engagement and that as student affairs professionals, it was important to be present, in a physical or virtual
sense, in the locations in which their students spent time. The director of residential life further shared that the mere act of being present and responsive on social media enhanced engagement and made it easier to correct rumors or misinformation.

The vice president for administration affirmed his institution’s priority in social media engagement during crisis as proactive in nature:

Social media is instant, and so as soon as something happens it is immediately uploaded into the social sphere… You can’t just let the rumors sort of build on themselves. I think that was the consensus pretty early and pretty frequently. You have to shut down the rumors or shut down the misinformation at the very least, and you have to do it quickly.

The vice president for student affairs indicated that in a long and complicated crisis she would “feel a sense of urgency to provide something truthful, even if the message is something as simple as ‘please be aware the something is happening, please wait for further information.’” It also depends on the size and scale of the crisis – if it’s a very short and fast crisis, honestly, there isn’t time.” The speed with which social media operates precludes full and complete intervention for every critical piece of information. All of the social media managers interviewed suggested that the context of the incident coupled with the availability of resources dictated the level of corrective activity. However, all participants indicated a willingness to respond to questions or concerns as their time and portfolio permitted.

**Intergenerational Components**

College campus are intergenerational communities, consisting of students of myriad ages, faculty members, staff members, municipal residents, alumni, parents, vendors, and other interested parties. Given the preeminence and emergence of social media platforms to manage campus crisis, each of the institutions in this study grappled
with how to utilize these transformational technologies without excluding key constituencies. University A’s chief of staff indicated that the creation of a “parents only” Facebook page served to bridge the technological divide and serve as a space in which “parents can engage directly with the right university administrators.” The chief of staff also indicated that the population of parents at University A prefer Facebook over Twitter, but still want notifications to come in through email.

The director of social media at University A offered that there is a “moral and ethical imperative to communicate with parents, and that they are entrusting the institution with the care their student, and with that comes an incredible amount of responsibility. This population has a high need to know and a desire to have as much information as quickly as possible.” While not all parents utilize social media tools, the social media director reported that most parents with whom he interacts have access to Facebook, either through maintenance of an account or by public viewing. The executive director of media relations insisted that “as times have changed so too have the expectations for parent communication. I understand and respect that, but I do think it’s important for us to keep our eyes on the prize, which is the safety and well-being of the people here, on campus – not their parents. Our priority is to keep our on campus audience up-to-date.”

University B expressed a similar priority in focusing first and foremost on the needs of its primary community members, but recognizing the unique role that parents play in the institution. The web communications manager insisted that parents bring a unique perspective whether they engage in real-time or on social media during crisis, and
that particularly during Hurricane Sandy, his institution was dealing with real parents expressing real concerns about their students.

Yet, parents are not the only community members grappling with the impact of new technologies and social media in times of crisis. So too are faculty members, administrators, and students who lack the technological wherewithal to engage in this space. The interviewed faculty member at University B remarked that his faculty peers would prefer not to use social media in times of crisis, but often lack the knowledge to access information in other venues in a timely manner:

My faculty peers and I go in search of the information if it is something we feel we must know. I think first we look at our email and then use the link or search the university website for more information. When it is something that is actively happening, I think we would get a text about it, if we’ve set ourselves up to get a text… Honestly, when it comes to the use of social media, or things like Twitter, or Facebook, or, I don’t even know what else they use, Instagram, I have no idea. I wouldn’t really know, because when it comes to crisis I just know the text and email. I do know that when I was in Paris during Charlie Hebdo and in [University B city] during Hurricane Sandy that I wanted to send out emails quickly, but it seems as if the social media piece went out faster and more broadly.

The lack of understanding of how to access, read, or implement crisis communications through social media was also shared by some parents. The parent interviewed at University B indicated that she preferred to look at her email and on Facebook for crisis communication, but wished her son would text or call her – a faster and more personalized approach.

The social media and crisis communications staff members at the interviewed institutions expressed awareness of the need to communicate across and with wide audiences. Citing multiple modalities of communication, including emails, text messages, websites, reverse calling, and social media platforms as part of a coordinated
in institutional response to ensure rapid and successful delivery of urgent crisis communications.

**New Technologies**

Complicating the work of crisis communications through social media is the dynamic technological environment in which new platforms are created, old ones abandoned, and the lag between student saturation and institutional utility. A variety of geolocation based tools, photographic and video-based message service are now on the market and are being widely used by many social media subscribers, including college aged students.

The director of social media at University A shared that the changing technologies are both exciting and challenging for crisis management situations:

> This kind of landscape is evolving, the technology is changing all the time and there’s usually institutional lag – on the whole we tend to be a little behind in adaptation and utility on things like social media. In this day and age, text-based social media is just not as impactful as pictures and video. People like to use geolocations and geocaptions and find all these innovative ways to communicate.

That institutions still rely most heavily on text-based social media to compliment text based emails and indicates a critical failure to understand the multimedia modality that is in use today.

The web communications manager indicated that while University B has made great strides in actualizing social media as a formal tool for crisis notification that “crisis drills must make better use of social media implementation to help prepare for more effective message distribution.” The web communications manager attributed this gap in institutional practice to a resistance in relinquishing the traditional written statements
about crisis: “Those of us in social media have not been traditionally involved in emergency notification – we’ve tried to step up and in, but have not always known about the larger conversations happening. I think learning how to let go of some egos on both sides, and including more people in an organized fashion is what needs to happen.”

The executive director of media relations at University A also expressed a desire for greater tools to understand and make meaning of external social media. Reflecting on the civil unrest in his city, he claimed, “We need cutting edge tools to filter and aggregate what we are seeing on social media. The riots were a great example. There was tons of photography helping to tell the story. We need a way to get to that information in a structured way.”

University B sees great utility in adapting its social media crisis approach, but in a methodical and managed way. The senior director of communications, working with both the marketing communications manager and the social media manager, indicated that they will not adopt any new social media platform “unless one of us knows it inside and out. We must have a style guide that’s written up, that is vetted, that is changed every semester as the rules change. I don’t think there is any permanency to any of the tools we use. We must remain student-centric.”

University C is also looking to innovate its social media crisis management menu. The director of media relations and communications shared that platforms like Instagram are not typically used for crisis communication, but given that it is immensely popular with his student population, it is only a matter of time before they must find a way to fuse it in with their toolkit. The social media manager shared that pictures and videos represent an important component of the social aspect of social media but she hoped that
“community members were not endangering themselves by taking time to photograph or video” during times of crisis. The flipside, as expressed by the director of media relations and communications, is that institutions must consider how to use photographs and videos to proactively warn and engage community members about crisis, owning that these messages might be heard louder and with greater force than text-based messages.

The director of emergency management at University A, the web communications manager at University B, and the fire safety and emergency planning specialist at University C, also indicated that social media, even more so than text or emails, had the capacity to go viral with greater speed than traditional crisis communications. The fire safety and emergency planning specialist remarked that social media is one of many tools utilized to help get the word out to as many people as quickly as possible:

…every tool we have, we go into it knowing it’s not 100% proof that it’s going to everybody. [Social media] is just one of many tools, and so we know it’s repetitive in a sense, but the goal is if there is a class of thirty people in a classroom and ten of them get the posting and say “I see something that’s serious” and turn it around to share with the class, it’s a good thing.

The fire safety and emergency planning specialist acknowledged that many students use social media all day long, even during academic commitments and classes, and are likely to see important information this way.

The director of emergency management at University A indicated that consistent communication saturation, through emails, texts, and social media was best for active crisis, but that social media was used to share institutional text messages through photos and screen captures, furthering its reach. University B’s web communications manager suggested that casting the “biggest net through email, text, and social media” is key.
Knowing that there is not one method or mode that will hit the preferences of all users crucial and that “giving people options about how they want to receive the information and getting them to be aware and talking about it” is most important.

**Human Factors**

Crisis communication, ultimately, is about getting the right information to the right people in a timely and efficient manner. The web communications manager at University B stated that “…social media is not a separate world. It is real world. It is real life.” He further asserted that any social media communication must remember that human beings, not computers or mobile devices, are the recipients. The human factor, the understanding that messages are being interpreted within the context of the recipient’s life and experiences, was an important motivator for how University B constructs its social media crisis communication. The associate director for global student affairs shared that social media has to be a place where students turn to both inside and outside of crisis:

> It must be a place that not only is welcoming but that provides updates and useful information throughout the years, so people see it as a place of active community engagement, celebrating accomplishments. If you only use it in crisis, people might have trouble finding it – they won’t look at it as an immediate reference. If it is used frequently, people will know that this is a source of information that’s either providing highlights or giving them up-to-date information – basically a reliable place to go.

The senior director of communications at University B offered that “it is important to go the extra step” and that after Hurricane Sandy “we posted this gloomy picture of the city, but it was beautiful nonetheless. We let students know that we’re glad you’re safe and put this out there. We wrote back to them and asked if there is anything we can do. Once they realized that we weren’t just writing, but we were listening, our engagement really
changed.” Even the faculty member at University B remarked that social media has the capacity to bring people together in a way that will complement, but not replace human connectedness: “Creating human compassion in 140 characters is hard. To me, the biggest way it contributes is by facilitating face-to-face interaction. Using social media to bring people together is an incredible resource.”

University B employs a series of strategies to ensure that the social media is both a tool for crisis communication and for facilitating human interconnectedness during crisis or tragedy. The associate director for residential life suggested that much of the follow-up social media communication, used when the immediate crisis is no longer impacting health or safety, is used to invite students to share thoughts, opinions, feedback, or to facilitate the effective access to support services or community gatherings:

> When we had the explosion and even in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, we didn’t want students to be alone in isolated areas. We opened up spaces where students could gather and talk, in person. At the end of all of our social media messaging was directing them to something on the web that has more information. We were always about if you need assistance you should find your RA [resident assistant]. You should go to a resource center or public safety. So I think that social media meets the needs for students to feel informed. Our messaging ultimately directs them to people who can help them 24/7.

The connection between social media and human interaction in crisis was a key concept in the development and distribution of messaging during crisis situations at University B. University A indicated that in its social media activity during crisis that helpful tips and information were always offered in follow-up messaging to assist students with difficult issues and to add a human touch. The executive director of media relations stated that “…getting a message out that is maybe information and may contain important
information but also intended to convey the empathy, the sympathy, the humanity of the institution… the fact that we as a community are all facing the same issue, we will face it together, and support those who have been affected.” Moreover, the social media director indicated this was not always easy in an academic environment:

The danger with [sharing compassion] is that you are writing long communications, you are not grabbing the reader with the first sentence. I’m a former news guy. [The executive director of media relations] is a former news guy. You are communicating in very stilted, often dry, academic language; you are getting your point across quickly, and to the point. And now, we are to the point where some of our students actually criticize. Whenever there’s a crisis, the first and essentially only thing they used to get was an email blast from [University A] and we know that is not enough. We’ve changed it up with social media. But do we consider a 30-second video recorded from the President? What is it? They run the risk of being formulaic. I think our sort of process is geared around crafting the statement, crafting a message, crafting an email and there are a lot of different ways to reach people right now. Our emails never include video, they never include photos, especially if you are trying to reach a younger generation… these kids are not even checking their emails. If your primary message is to communicate with them through an email blast that has been labored over for 18 hours, you are not getting to them. You have view social media as an opportunity to reach people and communicate with them during crisis as we never had before.

University A staff members, including the vice provost, the chief of staff, the director of emergency management, and the two communications staff members, were in agreement that the institutional culture precluded significant social media crisis strategy from evolving to a place of holistic human intervention, as it remains focused on reputational matters first.

**Lessons Learned: Assessing the Effectiveness of Social Media During Crisis**

When asked to share lessons learned assessing the effectiveness of social media crisis communications, there was minimal variance among the three participating institutions. At University A, the chief of staff shared that its lack of a social media crisis
strategy and institutional resistance made it difficult to fully infuse this approach in its work. The chief of staff also noted that the speed with which content is both generated and received makes her colleagues nervous: “...there is no pulling it down. Whatever you put up there, a quickly as it goes up, and as much as it will generate this chit chatter, it’s forever. But our community will quickly move on.” The chief of staff suggested that hesitancy over social media utility must be eliminated and that while postings may live on for eternity in a “social media time capsule,” the community will forge ahead.

The director of public safety expressed concern that after the civil unrest in his city, he wished University A had found ways to use photographs or videos to demonstrate that the campus community was safe – that one photograph can do for students what “ten-page magazine can do to make the institution look pretty.” The executive director of media relations indicated that a staff of two fulltime professionals, managing a social media audience of over 45,000 in times of crisis was overwhelming. His concern focused on the dynamism of the technological landscape:

It changes every two minutes. There’s something new to think about. There’s a new technology. There’s a new behavioral characteristic among our students, among our audiences. People have become more adapted to communicating on their own with the technology than waiting for us, two of us, versus 45,000 people. I really do feel overwhelmed by just keeping tabs on everything.

Asserting that until his institution is fully ready to enable the power of social media and support its human and fiscal demands, they will continue to only realize the small wins of social media crisis utility.

University C participants remarked that they wished for more debriefing after a crisis situation to explore the role and interplay of social media on incident resolution.
The vice president for administration offered that his team often spends “too much time going back and forth on follow-up communication” and that “by building in-person and virtual relationships on social media within and between” his team that social media may be better integrated in future crisis communications. The director of media relations and communications remarked that there often was not time to fully debrief and perform a crisis communication autopsy as the institution was already on to the next crisis: “I do consider when we go back and debrief and look at the situation and do a timeline. When did we get out our first tweet? When did the calls start? When did the letter from the President go out? You can kind of see, it also really tells you how quickly things need to happen.” The chief of police offered that this is an exciting time to be in university policing and crisis management: “I think we are in a position to model what is out there – because no larger segment of the American population is as technologically-dependent as university students.” He believes he has the capacity to use social media to influence how this generation will use technology for good during a crisis.

University B, operating in a global context, realizes that it must be cognizant of and pay attention to the multiple campuses and points of affiliation to successfully master social media as a crisis communication too. The associate director of global student affairs shared that her campus, located thousands of miles away from the main administrative and academic hub, operates in a radically different context and environment, but often receives the same types of crisis communications – a point of confusion for her students.

Replicating the process on the main campus at her global location will also not work, “given our government partners and the societal or cultural contexts of crisis in
“[Middle Eastern Country].” The manager of web communications who oversees the university’s web and media presence also indicated the myriad global locations must have unique web and social media markers to help differentiate from the main campus:

Right now, if you are a student studying abroad in Europe or Buenos Aires, and we have a snow day [at the main campus] and close, potentially you are going to the website or to social media and you’re seeing that it is closed, but it really doesn’t apply to you. We are now a global institution and we must break our crisis communication apart and messaging has to be targeted to the sites. Globalization in social media is something we must figure out.

The senior director of communications agreed and offered that social media must take into account cultural and language barriers that limit its reach and effectiveness. With a large international student population and with parents living far away – many of whom do not have English fluency, “we have to find ways to be bilingual, to share information in the language and context that matters.” The senior director also suggested that she did really care how successful the metrics portrayed her social media crisis content, but that it was the engagement and community-building components during crisis that mattered more. The senior director recalled that annually, on the anniversary of Hurricane Sandy, her team shares some of the memorable photographs and stories as a tribute to the power and impact of social media during crisis.

**Key Findings and Summary**

This study explored the myriad ways in which three large, private, urban research-intensive universities in the United States utilized social media as a tool to manage and respond to emergent crisis situations. Specifically, I sought to uncover how the studied institutions selected, planned for, implemented, and monitored social media in times of crisis. This study further looked a variety of human factors that contribute to success of
social media as an instrument of crisis communication. Some of these considerations are byproducts of institutional actors, agents, and policies. Others are the result of the complicated intergenerational community in which these institutions operate. Colleges and universities, by their very nature and design, experience crisis situations on a continual basis. To comply with federal, state, and local laws, policy mandates, and best practices involving crisis management and communications, institutions have developed comprehensive plans to saturate their communities with relevant and timely information.

Key Findings

As a result of my research, I discovered that social media platforms, namely Facebook and Twitter, are key communication tools used by the three institutions in my study for crisis situations. However, there are distinct institutional differences, in design, structure, and organizational culture that promote or limit the effectiveness of social media as an instrumental activity of crisis communication. While the context of each site was different, the demands, expectations, and realities of social media usage were largely the same. Constituents, particularly students, look to an institution’s social media platforms for timely and relevant crisis communication. In the absence of discovery, they look for and use hashtags, multimedia, and other tools to search for and share the institutional crisis story. Colleges and universities must act without haste to create social media content in times of crisis so that their postings and activity trend higher, faster, and louder than that of any other entity.

I was not surprised to discover that each institution in my research has a robust social media presence in use for admissions, external relations, alumni and development engagement, and campus highlights. There is institutional awareness that key
constituents seek much of their information from social platforms but what seems to be missing is the continuity of the university’s story. Social media cannot be shut off once activated. It is a reflection of who and what the campuses are and are a snapshot of that time and place. Social media helps tell the story of times of celebration and good news, but also of challenge and difficult circumstances.

**Social Media Selection/Pre-Crisis**

The process through which the studied universities selected social media platforms to use as part of their overarching communications strategy is keenly linked to social media utility during crisis situations. Each of the institutions I studied used a variety of social media platforms to communicate keys news items, events and happenings, student/faculty/alumni stories, research, and admissions information. Social media activity at the institutions was key priority used to enhance external relations and share campus highlights. The fluidity and dynamism of social media, the desired message and outcome, and recipient population, in large part, dictates the selection of the appropriate social media platform. In the cultural and technological context of my study, conducted in 2015, two social media platforms emerged as the most relevant and salient for use during campus crisis situations. I heard repeatedly that Twitter, a 140 character-limit text-based announcement (known as a “tweet”), was the most useful and practical social media tool for sharing timely and urgent communication. The speed and viral nature of a tweet, coupled with the engaged audience on Twitter at each of the institutions (numbering in the tens of thousands at each institution), ensured rapid deployment and saturation of messages. Twitter is both web-based and mobile-enabled, allowing both content creators and users to read, write, and respond wherever a connection to the
internet exists. The character limitation is a hard, platform-imposed rule. As such, messages are short in nature, and often lack detailed information. Understanding the content of tweets may also require a degree of social media savvy, as they are often composed using a combination of “hashtags” (made consisting of a # followed by a key word or indicator) and other short-hand words or phrases. Twitter allows for full multimedia integration, including pictures and videos.

The other most important social media technology in use at the studied institutions is Facebook, a multifaceted platform consisting of user-created profile pages, common interest group pages, interpersonal messaging, photo and video sharing, status updates, and other social networking capabilities. Facebook does not have the strict character limitations of Twitter, enabling a richer dialogue. Like Twitter, it is both web and mobile enabled, and uses a series of hashtags and familiar and recognizable names to convey topical information. The institutions in my study had between 125,000 and 575,000 Facebook “followers.”

In addition to Twitter and Facebook, numerous other social media platforms exist. The three institutions created a social media account and maintained minimal presence on new and emergent social media sites, if only for the reason that in the future it may be the preferred social media vehicle for university’s constituents. It is imperative that the institutions act with haste to claim an account with a recognizable (and preferably identical) username to that which exists on other platforms. This is done to ensure the validity and authenticity of future social media activity.

The process by which the examined institutions selected the social media platforms to use for crisis communications was tied to the social media platforms utilized
during normal operations. The Pew Research Foundation studies in 2010 and 2014 provide useful context in understanding the selection of social media sites for institutional communication. The prevalence of social media in the population aged 24 and younger is one of near saturation. Facebook, one of the social media behemoths, maintains a high, but decreasing, user base in the traditional age college student population. Frequency of use by younger Facebook members is declining, though account maintenance remains steady. Essentially, younger users are likely to have a Facebook account, but not use it as often as other social media tools. Interestingly, as referenced by the Pew Foundation (2014), the most dramatic increases in Facebook adoption come from adults aged 40 and older, another key constituency on college and university campuses. As such, the selection of Facebook as a crisis management tool is an optimal choice, for it reaches the core demographics and constituencies (Wankel & Wankel, 2011).

Twitter remains an extremely viable and useful tool for university communication. The Pew Foundation studies in 2010 and 2014 assert that there is widespread adaption of Twitter technologies in the traditional college-aged population, decreasing as age rises. Like Facebook, Twitter many university constituents maintain a Twitter “handle” and passively participate in the exchange of information.

While there is rising and dramatic usage of alternate social media platforms like Snapchat (a 6-second video that expires after viewing), Instagram (an image sharing service), Vine (a video service), Yik-Yak (an anonymous space in which users can rant), and others, the studied institutions focused their predominant social media activity on the two tools that offer the highest impact and reach, Facebook and Twitter. The selection of Facebook and Twitter as the primary platforms, a commonality between the three studied
institutions, was not based on quantitative measures. Rather, the social media teams indicated that the simplicity of managing only two primary sites, coupled with their potential for rapid dissemination of messaging were the primary motivators.

The daily (or non-crisis) use of social media is tied to social media’s capacity to serve as a crisis communication tool. An institution’s social media activity must be on the collective conscious of its constituents. Rather than attempt to spread thin social media activity across multiple sites, it was wise of them to pool resources and use fewer platforms with greater efficacy. As such, Facebook and Twitter remain the primary institutional social media during both normal operations and in times of crisis. I noted institutional hesitancy when social media managers were asked whether they would include additional platforms in their crisis communication practice. Their reluctance was tied to continuity of institutional messaging. The introduction of platforms outside of those used in standard practice might result in the dilution of the message and confuse engaged users and constituents. As Sellnow, et al., (2014) posited, it is critical to maintain commonly understood points of access for users to get crisis information. Therefore, limiting social media crisis dissemination to a few platforms helps to ensure the rapid delivery of information.

**Social Media Activity During Crisis and Institutional Culture**

During the myriad stages of crisis, a series of rapid decisions must be made about how and when to communicate. In an active crisis in which there is risk of harm to individuals, the imperative is highest. With immediacy, first responders must communicate critical information to ensure the health and safety of the impacted community. At University C, the command sergeant on-scene in public safety has the
authorization and ability to send university-wide text and email notifications to protect students, staff, faculty, and visitors from immediate harm. There is full integration with social media; the alerts are immediately pushed out through Twitter on the official university account. As Comfort (2007) suggested, ensuring that the impacted audience has the right information at the right time can reduce risk.

University B’s approach to immediate crisis communication is slightly different. The responding public safety officers are not able to initiate immediate crisis communication. Rather, the supervisory teams at headquarters will gather the information and send university-wide text and email notifications. While there is the technological capacity to integrate social media into this type of notification, the institution has chosen not use these features. The public safety supervisory team will notify senior-level communications officers at the university to determine whether additional crisis communication and social media activity is needed. A loosening of rigidity and greater openness by senior university administrators has allowed for quicker, more flexible, and less structured social media activity in crisis situations. This change has been received well by its student, parents, and community recipients and offered additional touch points for crisis engagement. This falls in line with the recommendations by Zimmerman (2013), which supposes that effective crisis communication is spread through multiple modalities in multiple points in time.

University A’s approach to crisis communication, in which public safety officers can send text messages in situations of extreme danger, but all other crisis communication must be crafted and approved at the senior levels of administration represents a challenge. The locus of control for crisis communication rests not with those
charged with protecting the health or safety of the community or informing them of emergent issues, but with those responsible for managing the reputational identity of the institution. While institutional culture at University A is different than at the other participating sites, the generational demands by its students and parents are not. Failure to include a robust social media platform will drive students and parents to seek crisis information from non-substantiated and unofficial sources, lessening both the veracity and impact of the messaging (Stephens & Malone, 2009). Further, Zdziarski and Dunkel (2007) argued that ignorance of the demands of social media won’t make it go away. Institutions must be willing to commit to the human, fiscal, and technological resources needed to successfully integrate social media into standards of crisis communication.

Social media is a visible artifact of campus culture. The ways in which University A, University B, and University C use social media to communicate about campus crisis is a reflection of the decisions made by campus leadership, the trust inherent in social media content creators, and the reception and response of campus constituents (Schein, 1996, Arslan & Zaman, 2014). At University A, campus leadership expressed great resistance to the implementation of social media in crisis communication. Rather, University A’s leadership preferred minimal institutional social media content creation, preferring to monitor and track externally-generated activity to inform future email and mobile texting. The locus of control for University A’s crisis and social media communication was far removed from the actual crises about which they were writing. This separation facilitates a lack of understanding about the utility and demand for a robust, timely, and informative social media campaign during times of crisis. University B and University C integrate social media in a radically different fashion and attribute
this decision to understanding the demands of and generational expectations for social media.

I was particularly intrigued that in 2015, institutions were grappling with social media. This social media quandary was not based in implementation – there are so many new and evolving platforms that staying up-to-date, in a technological sense, is an anticipated challenge. The struggle lay in acknowledging the meaning, the power, and the role of social media as an instrumental form of daily living for an entire generation of college students. The overwhelming majority of students, and a growing number of parents, faculty and staff members, and other affiliates at the three participating institutions carry with them at all times a web-enabled mobile device (Crowe 2012a, Crowe 2012b, and Briones, et al., 2011) that includes immediate access to social media applications and platforms. These tools and technologies are within arm’s reach nearly every second of the day and institutions must be willing to include cognition and recognition of these platforms in crisis communication planning. It is, in a literal sense, the virtual place where students and a growing number of other institutional affiliates seek information. This cognition is a key component of Zdziarski’s cycle of crisis communication and is a major factor in Phase 1, planning. Institutions must know where their constituents will go to seek information in times of crisis.

Social Media Content Creators, Scripts and Integration

A common theme throughout the three institutions in my research focused on the role of social media content creators. At each of my sites, between one and five individuals were charged with generating the institutional social media activity for the larger academic enterprise. However, there was great variance between their
positionality and the level of social media crisis communication automation. University C demonstrated the highest level of automation, such that scripts and templates for crisis were executed by the responding sergeant in public safety. University B has chosen not to deploy automation, but closely partners its social media teams with crisis responders, and in so doing, facilitates the quick postings of social media crisis communication. University B and University C both have a series of fill-in-the-blank scripts to which unique information can be quickly added before posting. University A requires that senior leadership authorize any social media activity in times of crisis. The pre-crisis activities at University B and University C fall in line with Zdziarksi’s stages of crisis, and straddle the planning, preparation and response phases.

While scripts are helpful in ensuring rapidity of message delivery, the brevity of messages often limits the capacity to fully inform the audience of the full scope of concern. As such, social media must be fully integrated into the larger mechanisms of crisis communication at the institution. A sense symmetry between social media, emails, mobile text messages, and stable website postings must exist. While the visual content may be different, the intended impact must be the same (Jin, et al., 2014). The outgoing crisis communication must ultimately coalesce centrally on the institution’s main website portal, perhaps the most visible, trusted, and authentic point of access and information for the community (Freberg, 2011).

**Social Media Accuracy and Expedience**

Social media has changed how colleges and universities communicate in times of crisis. There was near consistency across the board with the participants in my study that the crisis communication must always be accurate. However, the speed with which
social media activity is generated by other institutional affiliates is a factor in how long content creators can wait to generate both the initial and any subsequent social media activity. When I asked the participants in my study to outline the amount of time it took for the first institutional social media posting about a crisis situation following incident notification, the responses spanned from a matter of minutes to several hours, to nearly a full day. Social media crisis communication must represent the union of timely and accurate information (Sellnow, et al., 2014, Comfort 2007). Institutions may be calling upon recipients to act without haste and seek safety or shelter. Or, they may be informing their community about a crisis that does not require immediate action (Wester, 2009).

While the crisis itself may differ, colleges and universities must be prepared to act quickly and acknowledge a crisis, even if the fact pattern has yet to be established. As recommended by content creators at each institution, a simple social media acknowledgment follow by a promise to provide more information soon is often enough social media activity to maximize the viral capacity of message and retain trending behavior. Of course, as additional information becomes available, the institution must follow through with its commitment to continue to use social media to provide updates during dynamic events. This behavior aligns with Zdziarksi’s third stage of crisis management, response, which ensures that those constituents that need to know, have the context and relevant information required to make effective rational personal decisions.

Intergenerational Considerations

There was great variance in the age ranges of my participants. I spoke with traditional-aged college students, tenured faculty members, seasoned administrators, parents, and younger professionals. Nearly every participant indicated that social media,
while historically the realm of the young, has crossed the generational and technological chasm. As college campuses are intergenerational communities, crisis communication practices must make it a priority to use social media as one of many methods of distribution. Crisis communication is only effective when the message sent is understood by its receiver (Sellnow, et al., 2014). Institutions must learn from constituents and implement adaptable crisis management communication approaches that ensure efficient saturation. While the generation divide is shrinking as social media grows prominent in the adult population over the age of forty (Pew Foundation, 2012, 2014), the dynamic nature of these platforms ensures that a static approach will not be viable for long (Zdziarski, 2007). By repeating messages through various conduits of information, including but not limited to social media, social media managers at colleges and universities can help to grow the reach and impact of crisis communication content.

**Social Media Hashtags**

I was quite surprised to discover that there was little attention paid to the utility of hashtags. Hashtags, which are a unique social media language concept, indicate the subject of a particular composition or posting, and are preceded by the “#” character. The hashtag allows for a multidirectional exchange of information regarding a common subject. The sole use of hashtags during social media crisis communication at each of my sites was affiliation-based, for example, “#A-University” following a tweet. While there was expressed concern about not wanting to waste any of the 140 characters commonly used in social media on hashtags, they remain a powerful tool conveying subject matter, audience, geographic location, and severity of an incident. Students, in particular, use hashtags to make meaning of social media activity, as so expressed by several
participants. Moreover, hashtags convey institutional connection and authenticity and can be used to positively influence social media outcomes during crises. Given that only a small percentage of all social media activity generated during a crisis originates with the impacted organization, social media content creators should consider effective implementation of a hashtag strategy to positively influence its viral capacity, as so suggested in Zdziarski’s third stage of crisis, response. The manner in which an institution responds to and engages with its community during crisis is both a reflection of its culture and of its awareness of expressed constituent needs.

**Social Media Monitoring**

Social media is inherently social. It involves a multidirectional exchange of content and ideas. A willingness to engage socially on platforms like Twitter and Facebook during times of crisis demonstrates an institutional awareness of constituent needs and preferences, but is also a best practice in the field. While there exists a clear divide between the physical spaces or human spheres in which campuses exists and the virtual world of social media, many social media users, including the students and parents with whom I spoke, indicated that they viewed their universities’ social media platform as an extension of the actual campus. It was not something that they identified as distinct and removed.

As such, it is incumbent upon institutions to pay attention to social media and acknowledge that it is not a unidirectional. During crisis, a social media post will not remain stoic and static. Social media users will interact with this message in myriad ways. They may comment, retweet, forward, emote, disagree, or ignore the postings (Zimmerman, 2013, Lawson, 2007). Users may, with intent or unintentionally, share
misinformation, rumors, and innuendo. This activity is not limited to social media and happens in all crisis situations and in all forms of communication (Garnett & Kouzmin, 2007). While colleges and universities cannot control how a user interacts with a message once it has been posted, social media managers can be proactive and enter viral spaces to correct misinformation, challenge rumors, and redirect the audience to the primary institutional message or stable website on which the information is housed.

**Social Media Engagement**

During my research, I learned that University A, University B, and University C shared similar social media monitoring and engagement philosophies during the early years of social media utility in crisis, namely the years prior to 2012. Social media communication was viewed as unidirectional, such that the institution would generate social media activity and then let it lie. Users engaged with the institutional social media activity as an external event and that conversations and social media activity was not a concern that warranted active monitoring. University B articulated that its social strategy has changed, as a result of Hurricane Sandy, to one that is based in active engagement. When social media activity is generated during crisis, a team of social media staff members scours the data mined by its software to look for trends, issues or concerns, unanswered questions, lack of clarity, misinformation, and rumors. The outcome of this research is then shared to formulate a response strategy. As appropriate, individual questions are answers, rumors are addressed, and future messaging is clarified. University A and University C mine their social media data, but choose to not to engage with it extensively in a real-world, real-time context.
Social media is a form of social relationships and a social contract between users, either institutional or individual. It is a complex and powerful extension of in-person engagement and effective crisis management strategies recognize this. That University B social media staff members respond individually to the questions and concerns of users as they are able and modify their strategy during a crisis to adapt to the changing needs and demands of its social media audience, codifies in action a tacit understanding that humans are in fact the end user of social media activity (Schultz, et al., 2007).

**Social Media Evaluation and Success**

When discussing how the institutions in my research evaluate the success of their social media crisis communication, I was unprepared for the collective responses of my participants. They don’t. While there exists a significant number of proprietary social media analytic tools and second-party software that offer high level mining and analysis, little work has actually been done in evaluation the efficacy of social media crisis communication. Cohen (2013) posits that the college or university environment is the ideal microclimate in which social media utility can be exploited during crisis. When asked to explain why no significant evaluative measures have been undertaken to improve their processes, particularly in light of the opportunities afforded to this work on a college campus, I observed two extreme answers. The first, as suggested by University A and University C, is that there was a clear lack of human capital and financial or technological resources to fully implement a strategy of active social media engagement. University B, which has allocated ample resources to carry out its social media strategy, also chooses not to focus on massive quantitative or evaluative measures. Rather, University B social media staff members indicated that their feedback comes from
debriefing internally and the qualitative responses of their followers. This feedback represents human interests and is at the intersection of social media crisis communication and real world utility (Flizikowski, et al., 2014).

**Human Considerations**

Technology has made it easy to forget that our ability to communicate through innovative platforms like Facebook and Twitter exist not for the sake of novelty, but to bring people closer and closer together. From the context of a university, this has great implications for community-building, the exchange of knowledge and information, and for emergency communications. I was particularly heartened in this study to hear that there was broad recognition that people are at the heart of social media. While this cognition existed on a theoretical plane, there was a struggle at University A to translate this into meaningful action. The communications and social media staff frequently remarked during interviews that crisis communication and social media crisis postings were often labored over for many hours, in the pursuit of perfectly crafted message that conveyed useful information and protected the institution from reputational harm. At both University B and University C, there was an implied understanding that in crisis, the human need to know outweighed the desire to craft perfection. This was a learned institutional behavior (Zdziarksi, 2007), impacted by events like Hurricane Sandy at University B and the impact of violence on University C.

Writing with a human audience in mind and from the perspective of the various relationships that recipients have with the university helps to forge authentic and meaningful social media connections (Palen, et al., 2009). The distinction between that which exists in social media and that which exists offline is diminishing, blending and
creating fluidity in how the real world and technological spaces fill our human needs. The human need to communicate and to know relevant information in a time of crisis must be at this intersection (Palen, et al., 2009). Colleges and universities must be willing to adapt to this new reality.

Social Media Innovation

The field of social media is dynamic. The technologies with which I am familiar today will soon be obsolete. In fact, some of the pioneering platforms in social media’s relatively short history no longer exist. Our language and lingo as it relates to web-based and mobile communication will change as technology advances and as generational and institutional demands adapt. Interestingly, I heard repeatedly at each of my participating sites that text-based crisis messaging, including email, mobile text messages, and social media content that only includes words, lacks the capacity to connect with audience members that have become accustomed to richer content that includes multimedia components. The selection of social media as a crisis communication tool affords institutions a seamless and easy way to infuse audio, video, and geographically-based information (Cameron, et al., 2012). The inclusion of audio and video messages further cements social media as a tool through which the human experience can be transmitted – a particularly helpful asset during crisis.

One of the struggles expressed by many participants is the decentralized boundaries and diffusion of campus locations throughout a metropolitan region, across the country, and around the globe. University B may have to cancel classes in its main academic and administrative campus due to a weather event, but its overseas campuses, remain in normal operations. Determining who receives this closure message is
complicated, given the transient nature of its students, faculty, and staff. With social media, there is an opportunity to provide geographically relevant content based on user’s geotagged location (Stefanidis, et al., 2011). By deploying advanced social media technology in crisis, colleges and universities can ensure rapid delivery of targeted and interactive information to the right audience members in the targeted zone of concern.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was the exploration of how and what social media technologies are selected, planned for, implemented, and monitored in crisis management at select institutions of higher education. This study sought further clarity on institutional processes about embedding social media technologies into existing crisis communication plans, the monitoring of and engagement with social media users during times of crisis, and understanding the measures of success for crisis communication through social media. With an intense international spotlight on crisis situations at many colleges and universities in the United States, largely driven by social media, this study solicited useful information and best practices that should be shared with college and university crisis communication teams across the country. It also provided a moment of catharsis, giving social media managers the opportunity to vent their challenges in a constructive manner.

Recommendations

As a result of nearly fifty interviews, constant monitoring of institutional social media activity, keeping abreast of crisis situations, and analyzing crisis management and social media planning documents, I have identified twelve recommendations and best practices to assist both the participant sites and college and universities at large better implement social media strategies in their crisis communication planning.

#Engagement
Social media thrives on an enriched dialogue between multiple users. Rather than being a voyeur who only witnesses the rapid exchange of information, colleges and universities must be willing to enter this virtual space and speak. Social media managers must be empowered to answer questions, provide resources, and serve as a virtual hub of connectivity and community. Students and parents do not view social media as separate and distinct from the larger university context; they view it as an important gateway.

During times of crisis, social media managers must be privy to high level crisis decisions and trusted to translate critical information into the language of social media, boiling down the fundamentals of a lengthy email into a well-constructed 140-character representation. They must be trusted to answer questions, challenge those posting rumors or innuendo, and have the technological tools needed to serve as the virtual mouth of the university.

**#Fellowship and #Followers**

Use social media outside of crisis to build fellowship and followers. Each of the institutions in my study had tens of thousands of followers on Twitter and hundreds and thousands of followers on Facebook. If the myriad other social media applications were factored in, there would be hundreds of thousands of additional engaged users. The power of this population is intense. Institutions must find ways to continue to grow their social media population, but to do so in a way that captures the attention and engagement of its audience. They must also authenticate their pages using the established protocols requested by individual platforms. This authentication lends both credibility and visibility to social media as an external institutional resource.
The development of multiple social media applications in crisis, with varying levels of technical competency and skill, affords better access to the intergenerational community of users. Understand how your audience uses social media platforms and refine your institutional crisis communication and social media behaviors. Forcing a population, like parents, to seek information on Twitter may potentially be a barrier to access. I imagine students might say the same about Facebook.

**#BeHuman and #BeAuthentic**

We must not forget that while social media’s output is inherently technical, it’s input is wholly human. The content and tone of social media crisis communication and any subsequent interactions between the institution, its followers, or those engaging with the message must convey a sense of humanity. By crafting content that is relatable and meaningful to recipients, the human scale of the crisis and of the institution will be fully recognized.

**#Analyze, #Aggregate, and #Monitor**

Social media managers must be provided with the required tools to analyze and aggregate social media. University A has one full-time staff person managing social media and one full-time staff person managing crisis communication. In its present context, this is neither prudent nor sustainable. Social media is a behemoth and should be treated as such. There exist a variety of software tools that can track, identify, aggregate, and distill thousands of social media postings into useful streams of data. Technology must be used, in concert with the human eye, to understand how a community is experiencing a crisis.
#LetItGo

Shift the locus of control from senior staff to crisis-trained social media and emergency response staff. Senior administrators, removed from the specific management of crisis, may delay delivery or alter social media content, such that it loses its effectiveness. Social media staff members must be a recognized and included component of crisis management plans. Their ability to positively impact the social media messaging early in a crisis is an incredible asset to the institution. Their mining technology and review of trending hashtags and data can help inform the institution’s continued response with greater efficacy.

#FocusGroups

Few institutions engage in a critical review of the impact of social media activity during crisis. Social media and emergency managers should consider bringing together groups of students, parents, faculty members, and administrators in a focus group setting to better understand, in a qualitative context, the impact of social media during crisis. Institutions could learn how audience members are receiving, processing, and engaging with social media and reframe their practices to be more finely attuned to the needs of disparate audience members.

#UseHashtags

Use hashtags. Not only will it help codify and help users identify helpful information, it will enable the institution to visualize trends. The use of a standard and repeated social media hashtag will become a recognizable indicator of institutional identity and affiliation. It will also help provide useful insights, points of confusion, and long-term qualitative and quantitative insights about a crisis situation. Hashtags, though
not formally a part of our civil language, are very much a part of our colloquial cultural language constructs. Institutions must gain comfort and familiarity with their utility.

#BeExpedient and #BeAccurate

Be expedient. Be accurate. Crisis, whether expected or unforeseen, requires the unique union of timely and truthful information. Social media content managers must have access to and train with campus first responders. They must be communicating early and often during a crisis to ensure that the official institutional messages are the most viral, shared, tweeted and retweeted, and referenced postings. Even if the crisis lacks clarity and accurate information is not yet available, social media crisis communicators must acknowledge that something is happening and commit to sharing information as soon as it is available. If an institution doesn’t acknowledge it, one of its students or community members will. It is easier to manage a social media response early than to spend significant time and energy addressing rumors and misinformation.

#Photos and #Videos

Explore the inclusion of non-text based social media. Younger social media audiences are more likely to pay attention to content that is enriched by audio, video, and graphics. While not wanting to deter from the primary goal of communicating rapidly and conveying timely information, social media during crisis can be leveraged to provide a literal human voice for the institution, much the like the function of a press officer during a press conference.

#InstitutionalResources

Refer to institutional resources. Social media does not exist in a vacuum. It is a virtual representation of the campus community. During crisis, it should be leveraged to
facilitate the audience’s connection with the information needed for safety and the resources available to support. Social media can serve as conduit through which the university’s structures, people, and offices are stewarded to those most in need.

**#HumanResources and #Costs**

With few exceptions, social media is free. The apps and websites, content, and use is open-source and free. However, colleges and universities must be willing to dedicate the time and resources in the deployment of social media. Staff member job descriptions must be inclusive of social media. Use of these technologies must not be viewed as an externality, but rather as critical tools used as instrumental activities of daily communication. Institutions must consider how to allocate appropriate funding in the purchase and license of social media monitors and aggregators and both teach and train staff members in appropriate use. Given the entrenched knowledge that many students have on college campuses, a cost-effective strategy might include hiring undergraduates to assist in the deployment of social media strategies. The choice to ignore social media is not an option; institutions must consider the value of a well-considered social media strategy, both in and out of crisis.

**#Change and #BeDynamic**

Be dynamic and change. The tools and technologies in use in 2015 are not static. They will adapt and change, or perhaps even disappear. A constant audit of social media best practices should be conducted annually on campuses and all secondary social media accounts should reference and link to the primary account. Pennsylvania State University should be lauded for its social media hub approach, which serves as the central resource through which all institutional social media activity is coordinated. It is home to policy
documents, crisis mitigation practices, and helpful information for social media content creators and community members in crisis situations. Pennsylvania State University recognizes the inherent value of owning its social media enterprise and proactively engaging with its constituents. This hub model could serve as a reference point for the institutions in my study and others.

I also encourage colleges and universities to consider using and implementing proprietary tools like Facebook’s “Safety Check,” which allows for a multidirectional exchange of crisis information, from institution to user, from user to institution, and from institution or user to concerned community members like parents.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

This study and its associated research were conducted in 2015. This moment in time was dynamic on both university campuses and the virtual space of social media. Institutions of higher education faced myriad challenges related to violence, natural disasters, and other crises of varying magnitudes. At the same time, the tools and technologies used to provide crisis communication to affected communities became more prominent, inclusive, and accessible. Colleges and universities represent the optimal microclimate in which to explore and test new approaches to social media crisis communication. One of the limitations of my study is that I chose not to interview application developers and social media sales force or corporate officers. It would be prudent to include additional research in exploration of how social media institutional users and social media developers can collaborate.

The limitations of my study are really by the dynamic nature in which social media technologies exist. The tools and technologies referenced in my study may or may
not exist in the future. If Facebook and Twitter are to remain relevant, their utility will
certainly be different. As such, some of the contents and practices so described in this
dissertation will not be relevant.

The populations using social media, particularly defined by generational schisms,
will continue to change. As new technologies emerge and as social media learning
carries through and across different sectors of campuses and society, so too must content
creators adapt.

This study was conducted at three large, private, financially-stable, and
technologically infused universities in major metropolitan areas in the United States.
These institutions are not reflective of all college or universities, nor are their social
media practices, students and other affiliates, or their organizational culture. This
research captures a moment in time on these campuses, as so influenced by their recent
crisis and ongoing social media strategies.

One of the innovative new features on Facebook is the “safety check.” By
shifting crisis communication on social media to a joint or shared responsibility between
the institution and its individual affiliates, college and universities might find great utility
in deploying this tool. This concept will be particularly appealing to parents who seek
immediate affirmation of the health, safety, and wellness of their sons and daughters
during a crisis situation. This is an area worthy of additional research and exploration.

With the full deployment of non-text based social media messaging, college and
universities must continue to explore how to infuse photos and videos into their social
media crisis communications. Students are highly attuned to social media content that is
enriched with multimedia components. Additional research into the practicality, benefits,
risks, and rewards of non-text crisis messaging should be explored. Would a video message from a university official during crisis offer the same gravitas and convey the same sense of urgency about a campus disruption as an email? Would it help make the leap to interconnectivity humanize the institution and its crisis? These questions suggest an incredible opportunity for consideration and implementation.

Social media monitoring must also be explored in greater detail, from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective. The institutions in my study report staff members generate social media activity during crisis in varying lengths of time – from a matter of minutes at one institution, up to four hours at another, once an incident has been discovered. Students, however, are generating content on social media within seconds or minutes. How can social media monitoring trigger a more efficient and expedient response? Should there be a limit to social media monitoring? How can we assess the impact and viral quality of social media crisis communication? Should we?

Social media technologies are now embedded with cached geolocations and geo-sourced data points. Social media monitor and aggregators can pinpoint, with great accuracy, locations on campus or in the community that are hotbeds of social media activity, complete with associated hashtags, videos, and photos. Additional query into the utility of geo-mapping campus communities to social media might offer an opportunity to infuse targeted social media to the right and impacted audience. Institutional monitors can learn a lot from crowd-sourced data and can, in real-time, assess the impact of their messaging. This requires a significant commitment of human, fiscal, and technological questions and begs the question, “Is it worth it?”
One final area for additional research is archival in nature. While social media content is permanent in construct, we are only cognizant of it until it disappears beneath a litany of new postings and viral shares. As such, we have created and inadvertently archived a rich library of crisis content – from immediate and emotional reactions, to pointed directions and commands, and memorials. These messages include pictures and videos, hashtags, raw footage, snippets of a return to normalcy, and a continuity of operations. This social media repository is the cumulative effect of a moment in time.

How will history portray crisis on college campus and what role will social media play in defining how we, as members of a university community, responded to and shaped its response? How can we use social media before, during, and after a crisis situation as tool for good and to remember both the challenge of the day and the humanity that was resilient in face of great difficulty and crisis?

**Concluding Thoughts**

My initial approach to this study was technical – in my quest to understand the mechanics of social media utility as a crisis communication tool, I almost forgot that human beings were writing and receiving these communications. It gives me hope that, in spite of the myriad challenges posed by social media (and there are many!) that it can and will be used as a tool to grow community, to bring people together in a virtual and real-world context, and keep people safe from the many threats impacting our campus and civilization at large. As we reflect on previous campus crisis situations, many of which have resulted in loss of life, reputational harm, and damage to infrastructure, we will never for sure how social media might have altered an outcome. We do know, that with the right people and the right technology, colleges and universities will be better
prepared to select, plan for, implement, and monitor social media during crisis. The capacity to save lives, provide critical information, and protect the community and the institution are greatly enhanced by an effective and coherent social media strategy.
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