Differences in social media and traditional media in reporting a food crisis

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Media use in times of crisis has changed from one-way communication to multi-way interactions since the introduction of social media, such as Twitter, forums and blogs. In a recent paper published in Public Understanding of Science, researchers from the EU funded project FoodRisC (Perceptions and communication of food risk/benefits across Europe), analysed traditional and social media coverage of a food crisis. Using the 2008 Irish dioxin crisis as a case study, they found that social media reported faster and covered fewer topics than traditional media. When looking at the source of information, social media relied mainly on offline and online media news (e.g. BBC or Reuters); whilst, traditional media relied on diverse offline sources, such as experts, politicians or food suppliers. Twitter in particular functioned as a news information disseminator, with almost 90% linking only to newspapers or other media sources.

The Irish dioxin crisis is considered to be one of the first food crises with international impact that was covered not only in traditional media, but also in social media. During routine testing of Irish pork in November 2008, elevated levels of dioxins (reaching 200 times the EU recommended limit) were detected. This was caused by contaminated animal feed being fed to Irish swine. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), dioxins are highly toxic and can cause reproductive and developmental problems, damage the immune system, interfere with hormones and also cause cancer. Consequently, on 6th December 2008, the Irish government announced a total recall of all potentially contaminated pork products.

A team of European researchers carried out a quantitative media content analysis on 141 printed newspaper articles, on 107 blog and forum posts and on 68 Tweets, published in the UK and Ireland. The popular social media platform Facebook was excluded from this research, as the majority of Facebook posts back in 2008 were, and still are, protected by privacy settings. The data frame was set between 1 December 2008 and 28 February 2009, a time period in which nearly 90% of the coverage on the dioxin crisis was concentrated. Each newspaper article or social media posting was read by two independent coders to determine certain variables of interest (source, primary story topic and tone of voice) in the headline and main body of text.

Results from statistical analyses showed that reporting in social media happened quicker than traditional media, but it also declined faster. The authors explained that social media responded faster due to its ability to provide instantaneous responses without the time lag associated with editorial processes. On the other hand, social media is not necessarily bound by the restriction of traditional media to choose news stories based on the ‘value’ of the news, which the authors clarified was one factor influencing the faster decline of the social media coverage.

The research also revealed that social media only reached its highest level of coverage after traditional media had peaked. Given the fact that social media mainly used the online and offline media news as a
source of information, especially on the day after traditional media had peaked, it is plausible to believe that traditional media stimulated this second boom of social media.

Compared to traditional media, social media reported about very limited topics, focusing on the global reaction, governments' handling and how the lives of the public were affected by the crisis. Traditional media covered a wider range of topics, including the cause and the macroeconomic impact of the crisis. By emphasizing and excluding different topics, social and traditional media exposed slightly different ‘agendas’ or interpretations to the public. Therefore, researchers concluded it is important for today’s food crisis managers and communicators to have a good understanding of social media alongside the classical media channels.

Finally, the study also analysed the difference in tone of voice between the different media types. No significant differences were found, except that traditional media presented more negative tones in headlines than in the main text, and blog and forum postings were the opposite. According to researchers, this could be explained by the fact that some traditional media opted for eye-catching, negative headlines, without considering the consequence of the use of negative words.

The authors encourage follow-up investigations, but also studies considering the impact of the different approaches in coverage by traditional and social media. As social media continues to become more important in the world of communication, the effect of relying on this rather than traditional media as a source of information during a food crisis could be an interesting topic for further research.

Reference:


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