

Tuscaloosa: 4/27/2011

A Case Study of the City of Tuscaloosa's Crisis Communication

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Dedicated to the victims of the devastating 4/27 tornado and their families. A piece of my heart will forever and always belong to the great city of Tuscaloosa and the University of Alabama. Roll Tide.

Abstract

April 27th, 2011 was a day that changed the landscape of Tuscaloosa, Alabama as well as the lives of thousands of people that call it home. At 5:13 p.m. an EF-4 tornado with winds reaching 190 miles per hour touched down on the southwest outskirts of the city and proceeded to cut a path of destruction that stretched over 80 miles long, measuring a mile and a half wide at its peak. When the storm had passed 65 people, including more than 50 Tuscaloosa residents and 6 University of Alabama students, had been killed, 1,200 had been injured and approximately 12 percent of the city of Tuscaloosa had been destroyed. This case study seeks to explore the City of Tuscaloosa's crisis response communication strategies as outlined by Coombs (2012) including how officials disseminated information to the public through local news and social media in the aftermath of the storm. This study also explores these strategies in the context of the Tuscaloosa Forward program, which was an economic and community based recovery program approved less than five months after the crisis that symbolically marked the end of the crisis.

Introduction

The unpredictable and devastating nature of natural disasters such as tornados, hurricanes and floods make crisis response a difficult but highly essential part of the reaching out to the affected public in the relief effort. No matter the extent of preparedness by the communities that are affected, the force of Mother Nature can be uncontrollable and awesome to the point of unbelievable power and destruction. The 2011 tornado outbreak that spanned from April to May "was an unusually active and deadly period for tornados across the United States, with a total of 1,691 tornados reported across the country" (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association, 2011). In total, an estimated \$14 billion in property damage was encountered over the course of the outbreak across the country (Addy, 2011). Over a 24-hour period on April 27th the outbreak produced 211 tornados, including 62 in Alabama and four that rated as EF-5's on the Enhanced Fujita Scale. By April 30th the death toll had reached more than 250 people in the state of Alabama alone (State of Alabama Emergency Management Agency, 2011).

The city of Tuscaloosa sits in the mid-western part of the state, along the I-20 corridor, and is home to more than 90,000 permanent residents as well as the state's largest academic institution, The University of Alabama, which enrolls more than 30,000 students annually. Besides being the seat of Tuscaloosa County and being known as a major college football landmark in the south, Tuscaloosa is also home to the first Mercedes-

Benz manufacturing plant built in North America, which is located to the southeast of central Tuscaloosa.

On April 27th an EF-4 tornado plowed through the heart of Tuscaloosa, missing the University of Alabama's campus by less than a mile. The storm resulted in 52 deaths, 1200 injuries and the destruction of 5,144 housing units, or 12.6 percent of the city (Rupinski, 2011). The tornado "destroyed, severely damaged or otherwise economically injured 650 of the city's 6,200 businesses, which employed 7,200 people" and almost immediately "destroyed a building housing the emergency management agency and the department that collected garbage, trash and recyclables" crushing a fire station and a police precinct in the process (Copeland, 2011). The Center for Business and Economic Research estimated that the insured losses in the state of Alabama ranged from \$2.6 to \$4.2 billion, making April 27th the costliest day in state history (Addy, 2011).

The purpose of this case study is to examine the city of Tuscaloosa's crisis communication response to this natural disaster via local news outlets. The case will be applied to the the framework of Timothy Coombs' four postures of crisis communication that inform best practices in the event of a disaster, providing a clear exploration of how the city disseminated vital information to stakeholders in the aftermath. This case also takes a look at the ongoing recovery and rebuilding effort titled "Tuscaloosa Forward," applying the same framework of 15 crisis communication strategies used in the immediate aftermath of the storm.

Literature Review

Review of Crisis Communication

Although the term "crisis" lacks a universal definition, Timothy Coombs characterizes a crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organizations performance and generate negative outcomes" (Coombs, 2012, p. 2). In his writing Coombs suggests that crises are perceptual in nature and that the perceptions of stakeholders regarding an event influence the meaning of the crisis itself. For instance, Coombs writes, "if stakeholders believe that an organization is in crisis, then a crisis does exist, and stakeholders will react to the organization as if in crisis" (2012, p.2). With this in mind, Coombs suggests that calling a situation a crisis "should be reserved only for events that have the potential to or do seriously affect the organization" (2010, p. 477). The distinction between incidents and crises is significant; "a crisis disrupts or affects the entire organization or has the potential to do so" and an incident is simply "a minor, localized disruption" (Coombs, 2007, p.3). Coombs also

discusses “negative outcomes,” which refer to any harm that stakeholders encounter as a result of a crisis, this harm could include injuries, deaths, structural or property damage, tarnishing of a reputation and environmental harm (Coombs, 2012, p. 4).

Crisis management is developed by Coombs as “a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damage inflicted” (2012, p. 5). These four factors are prevention, preparation, response and revision. Prevention “represents the steps taken to avoid crises” by detecting warning signs and taking action to avoid a problem (Coombs, 2012, p. 5). The preparation element includes the crisis management plan (CMP), which involves “diagnosing crisis vulnerabilities, selecting and training a crisis management team and spokespersons, creating a crisis portfolio and refining a crisis communications system” (Coombs, 2012, p. 5). The response factor is the application of previous factors to a critical event, executing “the crisis management resources” to address the problem in the effort to “return to normal operations as soon as possible” (Coombs, 2012, p. 5). The final factor in crisis management is revision, which involves an “evaluation of an organizations response in simulated and real crises” to determine what it did right or wrong during its crisis management performance (Coombs, 2012, p. 6).

Crisis management is divided into three distinct phases of organizational response beginning with pre-crisis, which amounts to a risk management phase that comprises of gathering information about a potential threat and preparing members of the organization to respond if and when that threat becomes reality. The second stage is the occurrence of an actual crisis event in which recognition and containment must occur and communication with stakeholders through words and actions is critical (Coombs, 2012, p. 12). The third stage, post crisis, is “when a crisis is resolved and deemed to be over” (Coombs, 2012, p. 12). The post crisis phase, or evaluation phase, is designed to better prepare the organization for future crises, leave the stakeholders with a positive impression of the crisis management efforts and to ensure that the crisis is indeed over (Coombs, 2012).

In his writing, Coombs emphasizes the significance of how an organization handles its crisis response and he develops response strategies for organizations to utilize in his situational crisis communication theory. Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) posits that a company’s specific crisis will determine the type of crisis communication strategies used and how those types of communication strategies might have an effect on the organization’s reputation in return (Coombs, 2004). It advises that organizations prioritize protecting their publics from harm by providing instruction and adjusting information (Coombs, 2012). Instruction from an organization informs the public about how to avoid further harm from a threat while adjusting information

helps the public cope with any psychological threat. "SCCT organizes crises response strategies by determining whether the intent of the strategy is to change perceptions of the crisis or the organization in crisis" (Coombs, 2012, p. 156). These response strategies fall into the categories of: deny, diminish, rebuild, reinforce and bolster (Coombs, 2012). The denial category includes strategies of attacking the accuser, denial and scapegoating. It is any attempt by the organization to "remove any connection between the crisis and the organization" (Coombs, 2012, p. 156) and is applicable when addressing speculation of some kind or to deny that a crisis exists. Diminishment strategies, which include excusing and justifying, "attempt to reduce attributions of organizational control over the crisis or the negative effects of the crisis" (Coombs, 2012, p. 156). The diminishment strategy should be used within the context of crises that have low attributions of crisis responsibility with little or no history such as accidents and natural disasters. Rebuilding strategies are designed to improve the organizations reputation through words and actions that are meant to benefit the stakeholders and offset the negative effects of the crisis (Coombs, 2012). "The rebuilding posture," writes Coombs, "includes the strategies of compensation and apology," (2012, p. 156) which are most commonly used in preventable cases such as those involving human error. Benoit (1997) would posit that transcendence, or shifting focus from the immediate crisis to a bigger picture issue, should be included as a part of the rebuilding posture. The final category, bolstering, is designed to be a supplemental strategy that builds a positive connection between stakeholders and the organization (Coombs, 2012). The bolstering "posture comprises of the reminding, ingratiation and victimage strategies" (Coombs, 2012, p. 157) that should be used in conjunction with strategies from the previous three categories following a crisis. Reminding consists of reiterating to stakeholders instances of good deeds done in the past while ingratiation praises stakeholders and victimage attempts to frame the organization as the victim in the crisis.

Government Public Relations

As an organization by and for the public, the role of government in crises cannot be understated, especially in the context of natural disasters. "Crises are complex, often unpredictable and unique," which offers government officials the challenge of planning to respond far in advance of the occurrence of a crisis (Liu & Levenshus, 2011, p. 102). Identifying a calamity before it occurs is an essential part of a government communicator's role in managing crises. Liu and Levenshus offer five characteristics of all crises that assist government officials in accomplishing this goal: "(1) crises involve the destruction of property, injury, loss of life and/or reputation damage; (2) crises adversely affect a large number of people; (3) crises have identifiable beginnings and endings; (4) crises are relatively sudden; and (5) crises receive extensive media coverage and

public attention” (2011, p. 102). Government crises, according to the same literature, tend to fall into 3 categories: systematic, adversarial and image crisis. “Systematic crises impact the overall organizations operations,” often occurring “outside the control of the government and many times are difficult to predict” (Liu & Levenshus, 2011, p. 103). Natural disasters such as the tornado in Tuscaloosa would fall into the category of systematic crises. Adversarial crises “involve opposition to an organization” with opponents contesting or attacking an aspect of an organization (2011, p. 103). The NRA campaigning against gun control legislation could be an example of an adversarial crisis. Image crises often “raise doubts about the ethics, judgment or credibility of an organization, often including its leaders” (2011, p. 103). The Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal would certainly qualify as an image/reputation crisis.

The nature of government-public relationships is unique in the sense that the public must interact with government agencies in a multitude of ways not simply limited to elections and taxes. Two factors contribute to the relationship between a government agency and its public, according to Avery and Lariscy in the *Handbook of Crisis Communication* (2011). First, “government agencies’ products are the reputations they acquire through public action,” and second, “the nature of publics of government agencies in crisis communication is unique” because these publics cannot “choose to use or not use the services of government agencies” (p. 330). Sandra Schneider outlined how the federal government has developed strategies for government response in her book *Flirting With Disaster: Public Management in Crisis Situations* (2005). Schneider describes the response as a bottom-up process that begins at the local level, mandating that municipal governments should be the first to respond to crisis that occur within their jurisdiction. If local governments become overwhelmed with response duties, the state, which has its own crisis response plan, can step in. If the situation requires federal aid, it can only be applied to the crisis when the state government must make a formal request. Schneider (1995) explains that although there is an official framework for response, the reality of response situations is that agency-related differences often interfere with response for a number of reasons including funding and control.

Social Media

In this day and age the role of social media plays a major role for organizations that need to communicate to their stakeholders in the event of a crisis. The use of websites like Twitter and Facebook has changed the landscape of communication by enabling users to reach vast numbers of people in mere seconds. The social-mediated crisis communication model (SMCC) (Figure 1) serves as a framework for

communications management in the social media Internet age. “The model is divided into two parts that explain (1) how the source and form of crisis communication affect organizations response options and (2) recommended social media response strategies”(Liu et al., 2011, p. 246). At the center of this model is the organization, which is experiencing the crisis. From this organization the model depicts interaction between three publics who “produce and consume crisis information via social media, traditional media and off-line word of mouth communication (Liu et al., 2011, p. 246). These first of these three publics are influential social media creators who create crisis information to consume, twitter handles that have high numbers of active followers that can generate retweets and favorites would fall into this category. The second public is the social media user who actively consumes information from the first public. Generally speaking, most social media users fall into this category. The third public in the SMCC is “social media inactives who may consume influential social media creator’s crisis information indirectly through offline word-of-mouth communication with social media followers and/or traditional media who follow influential social media creators” (Liu et al., 2011, p. 246).

Within the SMCC model there are five factors that affect how organizations communicate before, during and after a crisis; crisis origin, crisis type, infrastructure, message strategy and message form (Liu et al., 2011). Liu et al. (2011) posit that for the organization to best position itself as the ideal source of information in a crisis, managers need to understand how two of these factors, form and source, affect the publics’ level of acceptance of different crisis response strategies. In the context of crisis situations publics seek out social media because of the unique emotional support that it provides (Choi & Lin, 2009), and their perception of crisis response strategies can be directly affected through the type of support that is received through all source types (Coombs & Holladay, 2005). As previously reviewed, there is generally a negative perception among publics when high crisis responsibility is attributed an organization (Coombs, 2012), therefore, in the context of social media, crisis engagement can dictate audience emotions (McDonald et al, 2010) and should be used accordingly. During a crisis the public has a right to know about the risks they may face and “communicators should be deliberate about communicating information in a timely and accurate manner” (Veil et al., 2011, p. 111). This is done to ease uncertainty and allow for the public to share essential information that could assist with mitigating the crisis (Veil et al., 2011) in a fashion parallel to that of two-way symmetrical communication.

To accomplish successful social media use in the event of a crisis Veil et al. (2011) write that incorporation of social media as an element of the crisis management plan is essential. “Using social media to

educate the public regarding risks, encouraging visible support of an organization or cause, and [establishing] a venue for open dialogue are all approaches to incorporating social media in risk and crisis communication” (Veil et al., 2011, p. 113) and crisis management. Social media may also be the best way to reach traditional media outlets in the event of a crisis. Back-channel news is becoming a more legitimate source during crises and traditional media has begun utilizing social media as a way of appealing to their audiences (Veil et al., 2011). The abundance of influential social media creators means that traditional news outlets have the opportunity to align with credible first person sources to disseminate news. Coombs (2012) outlines three basic rules regarding online crisis communication channels; (1) be present, (2) be where the action is, and (3) be there before the crisis. In the context of post-crisis communication social media sites that were commissioned to disseminate special response information can be decommissioned as a sign that the crisis was resolved (Coombs, 2012). Tools like Twitter and Facebook provide organizations the ability to provide updates or answer lingering questions that stakeholders may have regarding the crisis.

Although social media presents crisis managers with a powerful tool for reaching their publics, it also presents unique challenges. One challenge presented is following instances such as natural disasters the in which destruction and chaos can eliminate the ability to reach truly affected individuals. Power outages, loss of cellular signal and technical damage can limit online responses. Another challenge created by social media is the multitude of sources. Coombs (2012) writes that the “selling of online crisis communication creates the illusion that traditional media no longer matter” when, in fact, “over using online communication is a dangerous delusion” (p. 27). The myriad sources of online information can present crisis managers with the task of managing false information and maintaining one consistent channel of information. Liu et al. (2011) explain that under the stress of a crisis, social media users can create and disseminate their own information, reducing official control and complicating the management effort. Although social media is certainly a powerful tool for crisis communication, its use should supplement the application of traditional outlets in order to reach the greatest amount of affected stakeholders.

Research Questions

This case study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What were the crisis communication response strategies utilized in the media by the city of Tuscaloosa following the April, 27th tornado?

RQ2: To what extent did the Tuscaloosa Forward recovery plan incorporate these communication

strategies?

Methodology

To answer the proposed research questions an Internet search and content analysis of news articles germane to the April 27th tornado was conducted. The bulk of the material from the search is generated from a primary local news source, *The Tuscaloosa News*, because of its local nature and status as the only non-university daily newspaper in Tuscaloosa at the time. However, this case also utilizes sources from outside the local media to examine the various communication strategies and tactics.

Examples of Internet searches include but are not limited to:

- Tuscaloosa tornado crisis communication.
- Tuscaloosa tornado local government response.
- Tuscaloosa tornado emergency response.
- Tuscaloosa tornado local recovery plan.

Because this study aims to focus on the local response immediately following tornado, the local news content analyzed for discussion and application ranges from April 27th to May 3rd. This scope incorporates a one-week collection of 18 local stories and 4 national or otherwise non-local news pieces involving communication between the public and the local government in the aftermath. The national articles date between May 5th and May 26th. Articles from this period were read screened for content provided by a local authority such as the Mayor or a City Council Member. Additionally, a brief content analysis of social media content was conducted on Twitter and Facebook to gain an understanding of the tactics used by the city over social media immediately following the storm.

The crisis response strategies that are being applied to this case are derived from Coombs' *Ongoing Crisis Communication* (2012) and include the following response postures: deny, diminish, rebuild and reinforce. Each of these postures includes strategies for crisis response, 15 total strategies are considered in the content analysis:

- **Deny**: Includes attacking the accuser, denial, scapegoating and ignoring.
- **Diminish**: Includes justifying, excusing and separating.
- **Rebuild**: Includes apology, compensation, corrective action and transcendence (as described by Benoit, 1997).
- **Reinforce**: Includes ingratiation, victimage, reminding and endorsement.

Tuscaloosa Forward, the local recovery plan that was approved on September 7th, 2011 is included within this case study despite its approval date being out of the timeline used. The reason for this is that *Tuscaloosa Forward*, in a way, represented the city's transition from the crisis response stage to the rebuilding and recovery stage and presented a strategic plan for recovery in parts of the city that were damaged. Analyzing the plan in the framework of the previously mentioned strategies will provide a better understanding of how communicators adapted as the crisis improved.

Limitations

Although this study focuses on strategies and tactics captured in local media news sources, national news sources such as USA Today and the New York times will be used, albeit not as heavily, to supplement the information provided. This report is limited by its short-term scope and its lack of first-person material such as surveys, in-person interviews or focus groups to gain an intimate understanding of how crisis management decisions were made internally.

Findings

Social Media

Tuscaloosa's local government used several communications strategies prior to and following the storm to communicate to the city's population. Among these strategies was the use of social media to relate information from the city's Mayor, Walt Maddox, to Tuscaloosa's public regarding the incoming weather threat. The first tweet regarding the tornado was generated on April 26th and was generated from Mayor Maddox's office reading, "Mayor Maddox is monitoring weather forecasts for our area and Incident Command is on standby should severe weather occur." According to the Twitter content analysis, the city of Tuscaloosa, on average, generated around 5 tweets per day with content generally directed towards tourism or city business. The same analysis revealed that on the day of the storm the city posted 47 tweets, followed by 48 on April 28th. Although these numbers were due to the crisis at hand, the average remained relatively high in the months that followed, mainly spreading information about the recovery effort. In contrast to these numbers, over the course of November 2013 the city has averaged around 3 tweets per day. According to an interview of Meredith Lynch, the former PR director for Incident Command Center, social media was utilized by the city to prepare the public for the storm and to keep them as informed as possible in the aftermath (Butler, 2012). Official city tweets following the storm were directed towards stakeholders and the media in regards to storm

related fatalities, injuries, utility outages, volunteer opportunities and aid stations that were set up across the city for victims.

The city of Tuscaloosa's Facebook page currently has just under 10,000 "likes." This page was utilized in a similar fashion to that of its Twitter page. Communicating with the public about aid stations and relaying information about debris-related procedures was a priority (Figure 2). The city also used Facebook to post pictures of various relief efforts including aerial photos of the storm's path that were taken by the mayor, photos of various aid stations that had been stocked with food and water and even an album of photos from Charlie Sheen's visit (Figure 3). One photo album that stuck out against the rest captured the staff of the Incident Command Center hard at work answering phone calls and conducting meetings with city officials including Mayor Maddox (Figure 4). Throughout the month of May the city's Facebook page continued to post pictures of relief efforts and messages regarding the clean up process but it also added photos of various government leaders such as Governor Robert Bentley and President Obama as they toured the damaged areas of the city. Mayor Maddox effectively utilized the social media platform to portray the public's need for assistance and frame it against the extensive damage that Tuscaloosa had sustained.

Traditional News Media

After reviewing the 18 articles from the *Tuscaloosa News* it is apparent that using Mayor Walt Maddox as the primary source for any information that came from the city's government was a deliberate choice. Other leadership positions, such as City Council Member Lee Garrison and Police Chief Steve Anderson were quoted within the articles as well. The 4 national articles that were reviewed for this case also focused on Mayor Maddox, including a New York Times piece that focused on the challenges that he faced in as he transitioned from normal.

W.T. Coombs' (2012) crisis response postures, which consist of the fifteen varying strategies for communicating during a crisis situation, were applied to the 18 articles from the *Tuscaloosa News* and the 4 articles from national coverage. Of the 22 total articles reviewed, 9 of the 15 strategies that were previously outlined became apparent.

Transcendence, which is shifting focus from the crisis at hand to a bigger picture, was the most commonly used strategy used by Tuscaloosa when discussing the crisis; examples of this strategy appeared seven times. Although damage from the storm was immense the Mayor repeatedly underscored the importance of the long-term recovery effort rather than specific examples of damage in the city. An April 30th article, written by Adam Jones, City Council Member Lee Garrison commented that although the event had

been catastrophic they needed “to focus on rebuilding the community,” again reiterating the need to look at the big picture.

Tied for the most commonly found strategy in the content analysis was victimage, which framed the city of Tuscaloosa as the victim rather than the wrongdoer in the crisis. This strategy was used seven times including one instance in which the President commented that he had never seen destruction as extensive as Tuscaloosa before (Morton, 2011a). Mayor Maddox stated that the destruction was one of the worst things he had ever seen, calling it massive, catastrophic and indiscriminate (Reynolds, 2011a).

The compensation strategy appeared four times throughout the articles that were analyzed. This strategy consists of providing financial compensation for damage incurred during a crisis. Jason Morton of the *Tuscaloosa News* wrote an article on May 2nd exemplifying this strategy in which Mayor Maddox remarked that the federal government would pick up the tab on clean up costs that could reach \$100 million dollars (2011b).

The endorsement strategy, which was used 3 times, involves a third party endorsing the organizations relief effort. This strategy was exemplified when President Obama toured the damage in Tuscaloosa and praised both Governor Bentley and Mayor Maddox for their leadership in the aftermath of the storm (Morton, 2011a).

The reminding strategy, which involves reminding the public of past good deeds, was present in 3 of the articles analyzed. An example of this occurred when Mayor Maddox commented that his office had been transparent from the beginning of the crisis control process and would continue to relay information as it came to his attention (Reynolds, 2011b).

Appearing 3 times in the analysis was the strategy of excusing, which is the process of minimizing the organizations involvement in a crisis. Because the city carries no responsibility for Mother Nature the Mayor appropriately used this strategy when he commented that it was unprecedented for the city to have to handle the storm’s aftermath (Grayson, 2011) and that stopping to take in the enormity of the situation would paralyze him (Severson & Brown, 2011).

The strategies of denial, ingratiation and corrective action only appeared once through out the content analysis. Denial was used by Mayor Maddox to squash rumors of looting following the storm (Reynolds, 2011c). Ingratiation, which is used to praise stakeholders, was strangely enough found just once in the articles that were reviewed. This occurred when Mayor Maddox stated that “the real recovery will be see in the relentless spirit of our citizens...reaching out to each other, demonstrating that our strength and faith will overcome all, even in this dark hour” (Morton, 2011c). The final strategy identified in the content analysis was

corrective action, which is directed towards protecting the organization against similar crises in the future. This strategy appeared when Mayor Maddox commented on the garbage pick-up process, which had suffered significant in the storm (Taylor, 2011).

Tuscaloosa Forward

Tuscaloosa Forward is a strategic community plan to rebuild and renew the affected regions of the city. Analyzing the framework of the plan revealed that the plan itself is an embodiment of the transcendence and corrective action strategies that also incorporates the strategy of ingratiation. The plan states that as “an investment in the idea that smart decision making and careful planning” the people involved are the avenues to a better and stronger city (Tuscaloosa Forward, 2011, p. 1). This economic recovery plan was developed through the contributions of Tuscaloosa’s citizens who submitted ideas for recovery.

Transcendence is the very essence of Tuscaloosa Forward. It states that “in every disaster recovery effort, there is a balance between the natural desire to put things back the way they were as quickly as possible, and the need to take the time to make good decisions” (Tuscaloosa Forward, 2011, p. 2). The idea of looking ahead at the big picture is where the communicators in charge of this effort were aiming making its entire purpose transcendent in the context of crisis communication.

Corrective action is also a significant strategy of Tuscaloosa Forward and certainly a part of the physical rebuilding strategy. Planning the reconstruction of communities that were destroyed to better the city and involving the people who would be affected in the process so that they would be aware of changes were components of this plan. “Creating neighborhoods that are a model of economic prosperity, cultural richness and environmental stewardship and that integrate natural systems as amenities” (Tuscaloosa Forward, 2011, p. 11) was one of the goals outlined within the plan.

Ingratiation was manifest in this phase of recovery by involving the community in the formulation of Tuscaloosa Forward and consequently thanking them for their input. The ideas presented in the recovery plan were a direct result of consulting the affected public and when the plan was finalized the acknowledgements read “this document could not exist without [Tuscaloosa citizens’] input, insight and great ideas...there would be no framework with which to capture these ideas, organize them and hope to see them through to a future reality” (Tuscaloosa Forward, 2011).

Discussion

Crises like the one that Tuscaloosa experience on April 27th, 2011 create unique situations in which

crisis managers and communicators must set aside emotion and act in the best interest of a vast number of affected people. The theories presented in this case offer methods designed to make the process of communicating in a crisis situation more effective and fluid.

Strategies

The answer to RQ1 provides a good look at the response strategies utilized by the Tuscaloosa local government. The denial posture, which incorporates attacking the accuser, denial and scapegoating (Coombs, 2012), was largely inapplicable in the context of this natural disaster with few exceptions. The denial strategy was used but only in the act of rejecting false claims of looting throughout the city. Because a tornado is considered an act of god and the city was actively monitoring weather conditions for the public prior to the event there was little to no blame that could be attributed to the local government for the occurrence of this crisis.

The diminishment posture, which includes the strategies of excusing and justifying (Coombs, 2012), was more applicable to this case but only to a degree. In the limited material that was covered I found only three examples of excusing, all of which were intended to minimize the responsibility for a slow response to something that was sensitive and complicated, like a body count (Grayson, 2011). On these occasions Mayor Maddox would reiterate that the situation was unprecedented that that the limited resources that the city had in the storms aftermath were working as quickly and efficiently as possible. Justification never appeared in the content analysis. This strategy, which posits including messages designed to minimize the perceived damage (Coombs, 2012), would likely have damaged the strategic goal of getting help and solving the myriad problems that the storm created.

In the rebuilding posture, the strategies of compensation and apology had a similar application to that of the diminishment posture in the sense that they were rather limited. Compensation was the only strategy that appeared in the analysis and each time it involved the use of federal money to alleviate local recovery efforts. One of the articles reviewed indicated that the clean up costs in Tuscaloosa would reach \$100 million dollars or more a sizable financial burden that would dictate the use of the Army Corps of Engineers to take on the liability of clearing debris (Morton, 2011b). Mayor Maddox also used the discussion of financial relief to shift some of the focus to the people they were helping, saying “getting reimbursed for work is obviously important” but that money isn’t as important as helping the people of Tuscaloosa (Jones, 2011b). The supplement provided to this posture, transcendence (Benoit, 1997), took precedent in the content that was analyzed. It can be argued that the prominent communication theme throughout the entire rebuilding and

recovery process in Tuscaloosa was that of a forward thinking and carefully planned strategy. Seven of the twenty-two articles that were reviewed for this study touched on transcendence. Mayor Maddox continually reinforced that the recovery would be a long and drawn out process, likely taking months to achieve but he also commented at one point that the city was “going to cross that finish line” (Morton, 2011c). Apology was never used in the content that was studied. The city of Tuscaloosa never had a reason to apologize to the public because there was never anybody at fault for the crisis.

The bolstering, or reinforcing, posture included another of the most commonly used strategies by the city: victimage. The city generally utilized this strategy as a supplement with other strategies such as transcendence to demonstrate that it badly needed help from the outside world in order to recover in the immediate aftermath. Coombs (2012) argued that the bolstering/reinforcing strategies should be strictly supplemental in nature. However, in the context of large-scale natural disasters, like the one in Tuscaloosa, I believe the argument can be made for both ingratiation and victimage as their own sovereign strategies. The size and scope of the Tuscaloosa tornado caused a situation that is unique to unpredictable natural disasters; tearing communities apart physically but bringing them together to work on the problem in the aftermath. Victimage is a good way of soliciting help from other communities, in almost any other scenario it could be perceived as a “poor me” tactic, but in this context the good nature of people can be utilized through this strategy. Ingratiation as an independent strategy is similar in nature; stakeholders who are affected by these disasters certainly like to feel progress. Death and destruction can be highly emotional so Coombs and Holladay (2005) posit, “The type of emotional support publics receive from all source types can directly impact their perception of crisis response strategies” (Liu et al., 2011, p. 348).

The answer to RQ2 is rather simple as Tuscaloosa Forward was the embodiment of transcendence, corrective action and ingratiation rolled into a plan to better the city in the storms wake. The plan laid out guidelines for land use, housing, infrastructure and sustainability (Tuscaloosa Forward, 2011). The Big Ideas Map (Figure 5) sets a plan for developments that benefit the entire city through the restoration of devastated areas and it outlines projects including a memorial pathway, model neighborhoods and village centers. This form of the transcendence strategy is a measure of dedication from the local government and its public that exemplifies the two-way symmetrical model of communication; the community has worked in conjunction with the local leaders to share ideas regarding something that each party has a stake in.

Conclusion

Just like numerous other communities that have suffered tragedy and loss of life, the city of Tuscaloosa has kept its focus on the future. Naming its recovery plan “Tuscaloosa Forward” was certainly more meaningful than just words on a document and the essence of the city’s communication strategies following the storm reflected its long-term goals. The recovery plan is the harmonization of memorializing the past and looking ahead to the future. The practice of directing a community through a crisis by utilizing social and traditional media, consistent engagement and appropriate communication strategies is the best practice for crisis communication scenarios.

Having experienced this tornado and the aftermath of its devastation intimately, I can appreciate the efforts of the local government as we all tried to regain some normalcy. There is no ideal crisis situation; the nature of a crisis is that it creates chaos and confusion. Therefore, the job of crisis communicators is to guide the public through to the end using the best practices to make informed decisions. In my assessment of the case I assert that the local government did everything it could to reach the public effectively and it did so by utilizing the best strategies available: transcendence and victimage. One area that I would recommend for growth would be the city’s social media effort. Although the city did an outstanding job of guiding the public and disseminating information, improving its online platform through consistent engagement and information sharing could help to effectively reach more people in the event of another disaster. One of the greatest strengths in this case was the local government’s decision to make Mayor Walt Maddox the consistent spokesperson throughout the duration of the crisis. Mayor Maddox became the face and the voice of the city and delivered consistent messages that reflected the strategies best suited for the situation.

This crisis, although tragic, has been a tremendous opportunity for the city of Tuscaloosa to learn and grow both as a communicative body and a community. As the Tuscaloosa Forward program continues to develop its projects and ideas, the city will rebound to become better than it was before the storm.

Future Research

The size and scope of this study is miniscule compared to the vast amounts of data regarding communication strategies in the aftermath of this storm. Future research should be conducted taking into account the other major players in this crisis such as the University of Alabama, FEMA, the National Guard and the Red Cross. Additional channels of communication such as television and radio could be analyzed and applied to crisis communication models as well.

Appendix

Figure 1:

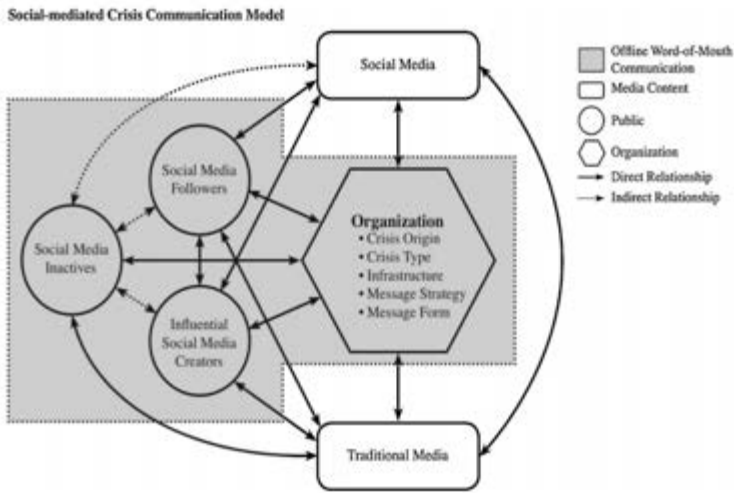


Fig. 1. Social mediated crisis communication model.

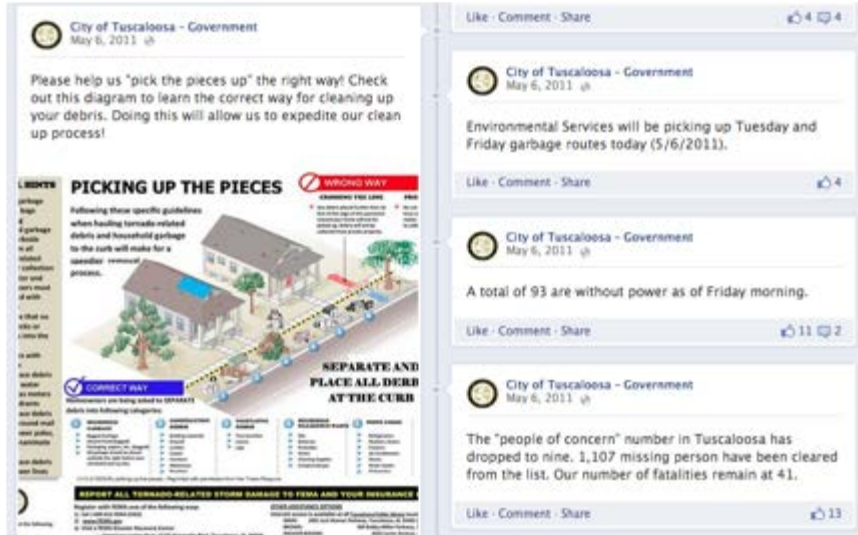
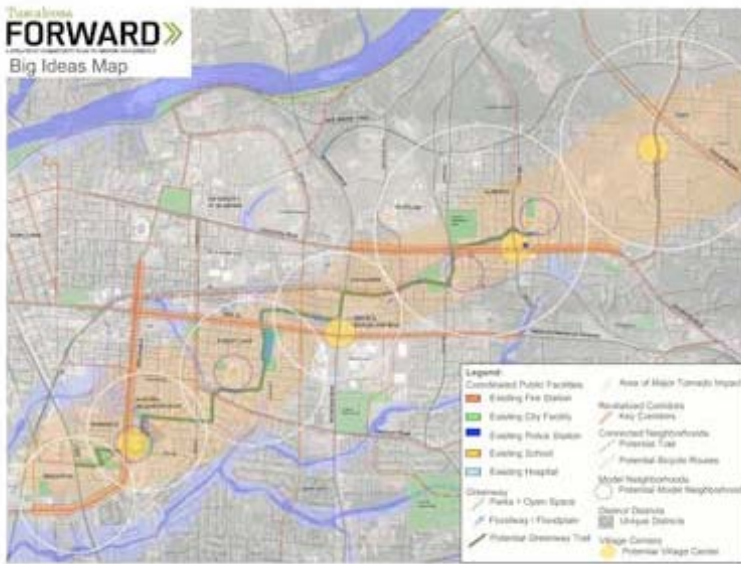


Figure 2:

Figure 3 (Screenshots were prohibited for unknown reasons): <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.189396161107221.46986.163854056994765&type=1>

Figure 4: <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.190998337613670.47573.163854056994765&type=1>

Figure 5:



URL's for Local News Content Analysis Material:

1. <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20110427/NEWS/110429737/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Morningstorm-damage-widespreadacross-county>
2. <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20110427/NEWS/110429687/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=APRIL-27-2011-Violent-tornado-leaves-path-of-destruction-through-Tus>
3. <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20110428/NEWS/110429681/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=12-32-PM-UPDATE-City-urges-water-con>
4. <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20110429/NEWS/110429615/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Maddoxsays-tornado-cut-a-6-mile-path-through-city>
5. <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20110429/NEWS/110429633/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Mayor-hopes-to-resume-garbage-pickup-Thursday>
6. <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20110429/NEWS/110429645/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Tornado-one-for-the-history-books>
7. <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20110429/NEWS/110429620/-1/TOPIC0410?p=4&tc=pg>
8. <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20110429/NEWS/110429596/-1/TOPIC0410?p=3&tc=pg>
9. <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20110430/NEWS/110439994/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=UA-confirms-five-students-killed-in-storm>
10. <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20110430/NEWS/110509975/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=City-to-begin-removing-debris-on-Wednesday>
11. <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20110430/NEWS/110509996/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Alberta-official-Kip-Tyner-hit-hard-by-city-s-damage>
12. <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20110501/NEWS/110509998/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Mayor-death-toll-may-rise-curfew-remains>
13. <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20110501/NEWS/110509969/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=City->

[releases-names-of-tornado-victims](#)

14. <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20110502/NEWS/110509934/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Mayor-updates-death-toll-estimates-clean-up-costs>
15. <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20110503/NEWS/110509903/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=240-still-missing-as-rescue-efforts-continue>
16. <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20110503/NEWS/110509915/-1/TOPIC0410?p=3&tc=pg>
17. <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20110503/NEWS/110509922/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=FEMA-state-officials-move-quickly-to-boost-federal-action>
18. <http://www.tuscaloosaneews.com/article/20110503/NEWS/110509904/-1/TOPIC0410?p=2&tc=pg>

URL's for National News Content Analysis Supplement:

1. <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2011/04/28/violent-storms-kill-83-south/>
2. <http://www.cnn.com/2011/US/05/05/alabama.tornadoes.mayor/>
3. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/10/us/10voices.html>
4. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2011-05-25-joplin-tuscaloosa-rebuild_n.htm

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