

SOCIAL MEDIA and Crisis Communications: Remembering the Parliament Hill Shooting in Ottawa

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It is no secret that social media has altered the way we communicate. The instantaneous, grass roots nature of social media platforms has transformed society. These communication platforms can be either a helpful resource or a burden to your organization during a crisis situation. Having a corporate social media strategy is more important than ever before. Events such as the Parliament Hill Shooting in Ottawa, Ontario remind us of the importance of Crisis Communications for Preparedness, Response, and Recovery.

Approximately one year ago on October 22, 2014 a fatal shooting occurred on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Ontario. Michael Zehaf-Bibeau made his way to Parliament Hill where he fatally shot Corporal Nathan Cirillo, an unarmed Canadian soldier guarding the National War Memorial. Zehaf-Bibeau proceeded to enter the nearby Centre Block parliament building where Prime Minister Harper and Members of Parliament were in caucus. After engaging in a physical altercation with the building's security personnel, Zehaf-Bibeau was taken down by RCMP officers. During this time the Prime Minister, Members of Parliament, and the Ottawa community waited in fear, shock, and disbelief. The CBC reported, 'As the events surrounding Wednesday's shootings in Ottawa unfolded, people flocked to social media to share what they saw and how the events had affected them.'

With the proliferation of smart phones and personal devices, social media response time is nearly immediate. In a crisis situation this form of push media can be especially concerning for corporations given that they do not have complete control over the broadcasted messages. Before social media became the default method for communication, corporations had power over the release of information. This was important because it allowed them to have control over the broadcasted information, influence public perception, and it bought them time. Time in a crisis situation is invaluable. This time can be used to strategise, implement plans, and release information on the company's terms. This is not the case anymore.

One of the downfalls of open communication is that alternate messages can interfere with safety and response. Before the facts are confirmed, speculation and misinformation can saturate communication platforms. In addition to misinformation, real information can be a problem as well. During the Ottawa Shooting, members of the Ottawa community who were hiding in fear took to Twitter to express their observations, concerns, and well being. Despite good intentions, if the shooter had been monitoring social media or planned a more comprehensive attack, this would have given him an advantage. Live information from tweets inside the building would have provided him with strategic information that would have put the Government as well as the citizens of Canada into greater danger.

Twitter is an equal opportunity platform that allows all opinions and perspectives to be shared. Most organizations are embracing social media for strengthening their brand and communicating with their shareholders, customers, and other stakeholders. While this is important, the Ottawa Shooting reminds us that social media is a double edged sword. It is essential to incorporate a social media strategy into your company's crisis communications plans and exercises. In a crisis situation it is especially important that first responders, the Communications department, and company staff are informed on how to appropriately use social media. Being proactive is more important to human safety and to an organization's resilience than ever before. ■

