

## **The effect of organizational offline point-of-crisis communication on online social media crisis response reactions – A case study of the American Airlines incident of April 2013**

On April 16, 2013, a nationwide system outage forced American Airlines to ground all of its flights for several hours, which led to numerous cancellations and delays, leaving thousands of passengers stranded (Mouwad, 2013). American Airlines addressed this organizational crisis and kept its customers informed by issuing seven different update posts on its official Facebook profile page throughout the crisis events. The posts yielded a total of 1219 user comments and mixed reactions on the airline's profile. Early examinations found that users frequently referred to the airline's deficient offline communication during the crisis events, which indicated a significant and specific interplay of organizational non-mediated point-of-crisis communication and publics' secondary crisis communication online as defined by Utz et al. (2013). The nature of social media as an uncontrolled communication medium (Broom & Sha, 2013) can pose a threat to an organization's reputation when user-generated-content reflects badly on an organization (Tucker & Melewar, 2005). Especially when large numbers of negative comments on microblogs are perceived as public opinion (Veil et al., 2011). It was found that negative word-of-mouth can impact individuals' future purchase behavior and influence their support of an organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2007).

The frequent mentions of American Airlines' offline communication at the point-of-crisis, in this case airports, airplanes, and telephone lines, prompted further research on the topic.

A content analysis of all user comments to American Airlines' update posts revealed that 8.6% of all the comments on American Airlines' Facebook updates referred to the organization's offline communication at the point-of-crisis. Only 9% of these comments were positive. The findings initially support previous research promoting the importance of crisis information form and source on publics' perception and crisis response reactions (Jin et al.

2011; Liu et al, 2011). In addition, the findings highlight offline non-mediated point-of-crisis communication as an important crisis communication form and source with significant implications on publics' secondary crisis communication. The high frequency of negative comments indicates poor offline non-mediated point-of-crisis communication by American Airlines staff. The hybrid point-of-crisis audience, comprised by crisis victims being the immediately affected audience at the same time, while also being physically at the point where the crisis takes place, expressed their displeasure on Facebook. Motivated by anger and enabled by the affordances of social media and new media technologies (boyd, 2011), the audience carried negative word-of-mouth away from the physical space of the point-of-crisis to a potential greater audience by creating negative secondary crisis communication online. This amplification of negative word-of-mouth and thus the potential threat to American Airlines' reputation could have been avoided with the use of effective messages for the immediate affected audience at the point-of-crisis.

This study contributed to crisis communication research by describing the interplay of organizational non-mediated point-of-crisis communication and secondary crisis communication online. It highlighted the importance of effective point-of-crisis crisis communication and its potential implications for an organization's reputation.

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