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Social Media and the Boston Marathon Bombings

During the 2013 Boston Marathon, a day that was meant to be full of accomplishment quickly turned into a day of tragedy. The catastrophe began when Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev headed toward the finish line, and Dzhokhar dropped a knapsack onto the ground. Seconds later, there were explosions that killed three people and injured more than 200 others. Shortly after the explosions, Cheryl Fiandaca, the Boston Police Department's bureau chief of public information, went to Twitter to announce what had just occurred. Commissioner Ed Davis decided this was the best way for the police department to get information out to the public. This was a critical choice, especially when cell phone reception was cut off at the time due to fears of additional bombings.

The police department was also able to use Twitter to gain information from the public, which benefited both sides. The department tweeted images of suspects and requested information about them. However, this was also a time of widespread misinformation, and the department had to actively post the truth and call out false information. Misinformation was widely published and televised, causing severe chaos and confusion. For example, news organizations such as the Associated Press and CNN incorrectly reported that a suspect was in custody. The police department had to post the truth to both prevent and combat the spread of false information.

The department did an excellent job of connecting with the public and keeping everyone up to date. It disclosed as much new information as it could without jeopardizing the investigation. To keep everyone safe, it posted safety alerts and announced lockdowns. Twitter was also an effective way for the police force to seek public assistance. The department released images of suspects and asked users to share any information they may have on them. Facebook was also used in addition to Twitter to increase the number of users who saw the posts. Although the police did not post updates as quickly on Facebook, the platform was still used for posts of sympathy and support for survivors. However, Twitter remained the most popular source of information for concerned citizens. Even Dzhokhar's capture was first revealed on Twitter (Kim & Smith, 2014).

Fortunately, the Boston Police Department had prior experience with social media and was prepared for a crisis like this. The department had established a Twitter account in 2009 and then extended to Facebook, YouTube and other sites. Fiandaca, the bureau chief, had 16 years of experience as a TV news reporter. Before the event, the department had already trained its staff to handle public relations duties and post on Facebook and Twitter. In 2011, the department's Twitter account started implementing the hashtag "#TweetfromtheBeat." This GroupTweet function permitted approved team members to tweet directly to the department's Twitter feed while on duty. Fiandaca used this feature and hashtag as she posted the first announcement that the explosions occurred (Davis III et al., 2014).

Looking at this scenario, it is evident that the department followed crisis communication and conflict resolution models correctly. While members of the department were well-prepared for a crisis with their social media skills, they could not have imagined the details of this tragic event or how the investigation would unfold. One thing the department did well was put the

public first. Immediately after the event took place, it made it a point to notify the public via Twitter. It prioritized public safety and gave Boston residents the information they needed to remain safe. The police department also did an incredible job of being accessible and communicating frequently. It was essential to foster transparency and make the public feel as informed as possible. If it hadn't communicated regularly, unreliable sources would have attempted to offer details about the investigation. Monitoring news coverage was another step it did effectively to achieve successful crisis communication. The news did not always report the story correctly, and the department promptly fought and addressed any mistakes (Swann, 2019). The department made it clear that its account was the most trustworthy source of information. Strong communication enabled the crisis to be resolved within days.

In this case, the Boston Police Department followed each of the Page Principles. The few that stood out to me as being exceptionally followed were "Tell the truth", "Manage for tomorrow" and "Remain calm, patient and good-humored." The department made the truth a priority throughout the entire crisis. It was cautious in only posting accurate and necessary information. It made the effort to uncover and correct false statements so that everyone could have access to the ultimate truth. In accordance with the "Manage for tomorrow" principle, the team had been preparing for this event for years. It had been using social media to advance department and public interest since 2009. With sufficient public relations education, the team members were prepared to communicate during such a critical event. Furthermore, the department set an example by posting updates in a calm and patient manner. It virtually always stated facts without using any rhetoric that might cause panic (Arthur W. Page Society, n.d.). Essentially, the application of these principles during this crisis indicates that the Boston Police Department is a strong leader in crisis communication.

The general communication strategy of the police department was to leverage social media (primarily Twitter) to quickly share updates and engage with the public. Specific tactics included live and active tweeting to ensure that the public received accurate information as soon as possible. Another key tactic used by the department was the active correction of misinformation. When it identified an inaccuracy made by the public, a different account or another form of media, it was quick to fix the error before the incorrect information could spread any further. This strategy and supporting tactics proved to be effective because of the large amount of interactions from Twitter users. In a matter of days, the department's account grew from 54,000 to 330,000 followers. Within five days of the bombing, the account had reached 49 million users. Suspect photos were retweeted a total of 57,500 times. The final "CAPTURED!!!" tweet received approximately 144,000 retweets (Swann, 2013). When compared to more traditional methods of communication such as a press statement or press conference, social media allows for a faster distribution of information.

After days of panic and confusion, the department's account released a message announcing that the terror was over and justice had won. Although this event had a negative impact on many people, there was a positive aftermath as the police department is still well-regarded for its leadership in handling the crisis. Several colleges have done in-depth studies on the event and have applauded the department's use of social media (The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2014). According to Harvard publications, the Boston Police Department established an example to be followed in the event of a future crisis (Gavel, 2014). Favorable headlines on the department's leadership could be found on sites such as Mashable and The Huffington Post (Kim & Smith, 2014). Ultimately, numerous publications point to this story as an example of how to use social media to communicate during a crisis.

Another major case involving a police department is the condominium collapse in Surfside, Florida. This tragedy occurred on June 24, 2021. The police department's Twitter account, @MiamiDadePD, provided frequent updates, similar to the Boston Police Department. It also shared a significant amount of information on Facebook. The day the condominiums collapsed, a press conference was posted on Facebook, and the link was then posted on the department's Twitter. There was a constant stream of media briefing updates and the identification of additional victims with condolences.

The department also encouraged the safety of citizens by tweeting about following traffic patterns near the disaster location. Another similar aspect of the case was the use of Twitter to ask for help from the public. The department tweeted saying that it was seeking community assistance and called for witnesses of the collapse as well as any images or videos. These continual releases of information added up to 92 Twitter updates, 35 of which were media briefing videos (Miami-Dade Police, 2021). This police department also adhered to the practices of constant communication and transparency. In this case, however, the department relied more on Facebook and lengthier videos than in the Boston Marathon case. The Boston Marathon case focused more on releasing brief, factual messages to the public. However, both departments followed the same key principles.

The Boston Marathon tragedy can teach public relations practitioners a lot about how to handle a crisis. It highlights the necessity of distributing reliable and accurate information out to the public before an unreliable source can cause confusion. It also teaches us that we must constantly evolve and adapt to societal changes. When the public begins to use social media platforms such as Twitter, organizations like police departments must follow. In situations of emergency, it is especially essential to go where you will reach the most people and effectively

spread your message. Third, this scenario reveals the importance and power of two-way communication. Rather than just holding a press conference, social media allows the public to engage with the organization (Davis III et al., 2014). The public can offer support, resulting in a mutually beneficial relationship. Social media is also a quick approach to reaching an audience without having to go through another source. This case ultimately teaches us that communication is key, and truth is critical. We can learn that skilled public relations professionals have the ability to alleviate the frustrations and chaos of even the worst situations.

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