Live Cattle Trade – The Case of an Online Crisis

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This paper examines the 2011 live export cattle crisis and how the use of social media to express outrage forced the Australian Government to change its policy. The case is used to illustrate that social media is a powerful tool the government cannot ignore. We argue that social media is now a field where all stakeholders can engage in open and transparent debate with elected officials with a view to effecting change. For governments, crisis management must now include strategies for arguing their case in the court of public opinion online and engaging directly with stakeholders to influence the direction and duration of the crisis. When governments fail to respond and engage online, voters take action. This is nowhere better illustrated than when ABC Television's Four Corners program broadcast dramatic footage of Australian cattle being slaughtered in Indonesia contrary to government standards, creating a political, economic and social media storm. Large numbers of Facebook sites were created about this issue, seeking the cessation of exports. The federal government reacted to this pressure by temporarily banning live exports.This paper explores the role and power of social media in influencing crises and driving political change and decision making.

Introduction

Social media offer innovative opportunities for political actors, institutions and voters to interact with one another (Clarke 2010:5). Their proliferation has caused the traditional news cycle to be superseded by the opinion cycle where individuals can comment directly and publicly on the actions of the government (Harris 2011). Democratic as this may seem to be, the power and immediacy of the opinion cycle poses significant challenges for a large and complex bureaucracy, such as the federal government, in its attempts to monitor, preempt and manage crises online.

A crisis is an event that disrupts social order, affects interaction with stakeholders and has the potential to damage a government's reputation and legitimacy (Patriotta *et al.* 2011). In May last year, the Gillard Government faced a crisis surrounding Australia's export of live cattle to Indonesia and the subsequent inhumane treatment of the animals prior to slaughter. The crisis was magnified by vivid images on national television of Australian cattle being mistreated. The crisis exploded via social media with an unprecedented amount of coverage across a range of platforms and the fervour of public opinion forcing the government to respond.

As a consequence of social media's immediacy and interactivity 'the terrain of public relations practice is shifting with new media bringing about substantial increases in stakeholder strength through facilitating communication within stakeholder groups and between different stakeholder groups (Van der Merwe *et al*. 2005:39). James (2007) refers to the paradigm shift that has occurred in the public relations sphere in the last six years. No longer is issues and crisis management only driven by how the mainstream media may react, but the practitioner has a whole new set of skills to understand and manage (Alexander 2002).

The move from media gatekeepers to demassified communication (Heath 1997) where publics take control of their own information sources, means communication professionals need to be highly proactive in monitoring a much wider sphere of potential issues. They also need to have the ability to understand database management, create websites, blogs and other social media sites that engage with key stakeholders, understand how collaborative software can sift through the world wide web for clues to potential issues, that is to know where activist sites are and stay abreast of what their traffic is discussing. Such a transformative change of managing a crisis online also requires a change in approach for the government. To engage with stakeholders in the online public sphere requires a willingness to engage, having the tools to monitor and interpret online conversations and finally, the agility to respond with unprecedented speed (Alexander 2002).

Managing Perceptions Online

Habermas (2006) proposed that a vibrant democracy depends on a viable 'public sphere' which he described

as a forum of 'rational critical debate in which citizens come together and confer freely about matters of general interest' (Habermas 2006: 412-413). Today, the public sphere also encompasses the online sphere where common vernacular and political discourse intersect. For those in the public sphere, such as our elected members of Parliament, social media offers new opportunities for political engagement with stakeholders via direct dialogue with power brokers in a transparent, open and influential debate on a range of issues (DiMaggio *et al.* 2001 in Macnamara 2011:105). The public outrage in response to Australian cattle being exported to Indonesia and the pervasiveness of social media saw the crisis dominate all forms of media online. YouTube videos, opinion polls, blogs and tweets forced the government along with traditional media coverage into a reactive and defensive engagement with stakeholders.

As a consequence of a clear lack of crisis planning fundamentals, including environmental scanning to detect developing issues, preparing a response, consistent messaging and a pre-planned response, the government was left scrambling. As with any organisation unprepared for a crisis event, the government was reacting to, rather than leading and influencing the online discussion, resulting in policy decisions being taken on the run with the government incurring significant reputational damage as a consequence (Fearn-Banks 2007: 52). The government's reaction to the crisis, in terms of timing, stakeholder communication and behaviour, will leave an indelible impression on its publics (Chia and Synnott 2009: 272).

The crisis planning fundamentals referred to above are vital for strategic crisis management, and more so for crises online (Jordan-Meier 2011). Engagement with stakeholders is now direct and immediate, exposing those organisations who have failed to prepare to the real risk of significant reputational damage (Jordan-Meier 2011). To offset the risk, organisations must be prepared to engage online. Organisations, the government included, need to be willing to be part of the conversation. Contemporary 'crisis management begins without fully knowing what to do, why it's important and whether or not we're doing everything the right way. But it is in the process of engagement that we learn and mature' (Solis 2010:195). Engaging in dialogue with voters, particularly when issues escalate to crisis, is a useful strategy to enhance a government's chance of re-election. If the government is ill-prepared to engage in the discussion, social media will expose this weakness very publicly as happened in the live cattle export crisis of 2011.

Managing Public Perceptions Online

The web has empowered a new class of authoritative voices that organisations cannot afford to ignore (Solis and Breakenridge 2009). According to Weick (1995), the difficulty for the organisation is not the crisis itself, but how the organisation responds. Online tools can support crisis

communication efforts by informing the organisation of stakeholders' issues. Social media's usefulness depends on the willingness of the organisation to engage in dialogue, having rigorous environmental scanning in place, and being familiar with online territory. Conversely, organisations that are not participating or responding to online agendas do so at their peril (Jordan-Meier 2011: 209). In the live cattle export crisis, the government was quickly embarrassed, finding itself reacting to harsh criticism by being unprepared or unwilling to engage online.

Communication prior, during and after a crisis is one of the most significant influencers in determining the longevity of the impact on the government and its reputation (Coombs 1999). The government needs to be prepared in advance to engage with and harness the power of social media into their crisis communications (Chia and Synnott 2009), if their goal is re-election and minimising reputational damage.

Crises are always a difficult time for organisations (Taylor and Perry 2005). A crisis played out in the public arena such as this one, fuelled by graphic and disturbing images, will challenge the mettle of any government. The diffusion of traditional and new media tactics demands a timely, accurate and effective response from the organisation at the centre of the crisis (Taylor and Perry 2005). The goal for the government, as with any organisation facing a crisis, is to navigate the online storm sensitively and respond quickly to emerge with minimal long-term reputational damage in the minds of voters.

Online Engagement

Heath (1997) refers to the dialogic nature of social media allowing for increased dialogue between the government and stakeholders and access to some stakeholders difficult to reach. Governments can engage online in a number of ways: 'connecting links on [the government's] website focussed on the crisis, real-time monitoring providing current information on the crisis as it develops, and multi-media information such as live video, podcasts and audio files to keep audiences informed of the crisis developments' (Taylor and Perry 2005: 212).

Live Cattle Export Crisis

The following is an overview of the social media storm in response to the live export crisis in May, 2011. Our discussion of the crisis is drawn from an analysis of the content of four websites: Animals Australia (2011), the RSPCA (2011), GetUp! (2011) and Australians Supporting Beef Farmers (2011). Each of these websites was integral to the online discussion of the crisis and the subsequent response from the government.

The Four Corners ABC TV program 'A bloody business' was shown on 30 May, 2011, and Animals Australia

created a website titled Ban Live Export on 31 May, 2011. This was immediately joined by the social network site GetUp!, which launched its fastest-ever petition campaign. The RSPCA also joined the online discussion. The websites of Animals Australia, RSPCA and GetUp! crashed that same day under immense public response, with more than 2000 visitors per minute. More than 35,000 signed the online petition on the GetUp! site in just five hours. The GetUp! Facebook site generated a staggering 578,908 likes (GetUp! 2011). The extensive social media onslaught was supported by traditional print media and radio outlets. By the next day, 1 June, 2011, the Federal Minister for Agriculture, the Honourable Joe Ludwig, stopped the trade of live animals to certain Indonesian facilities. The pressure on the government was unceasing with more people signing the GetUp! petition and an unprecedented amount of traffic on the animal activist websites. Animals Australia Campaign Director and cruelty investigator Lyn White (2011) said, 'Over the past week, Australians have voiced their overwhelming outrage and disapproval of the live trade and the government's failure to take urgent action' (White 2011). Referring to the impact of the crisis on the government's reputation, White (2011) continued 'the only way the Gillard government will redeem itself in the eyes of the public will be to support legislation soon to be introduced into the federal Parliament to end live export' (White 2011). The RSPCA Australia and Animals Australia's online national campaign calling for an end to all live exports to Indonesia reached a wide audience, was very effective and one the government could not afford to ignore.

Traditional media coverage supported the online coverage. The Age newspaper on 8 June, 2011, reported that the decision was a big win for the online campaigns of Animals Australia and the RSPCA, which had been pushing for a total ban, as well as Labor backbenchers who joined the push after the massive response from the public to a Four Corners report (Grattan 2011). Grattan further reported that the suspension of live exports was 'in substantial part, a rare victory for people power. While not the only factor driving the decisions, there's no doubt that the huge public campaign had a large influence' (Grattan 2011). The effectiveness and reach of the online campaign is illustrated in 230,000 Australians signing GetUp's online petition protesting against the government's actions and lack of response (Grattan 2011).

Further, in a blog on the 8 June 2011, GetUp! posted the following message: 'Today's announcement marks a radical improvement on the Government's stance from just days ago. There can be no doubt that by creating a huge, hard-hitting campaign and one of the largest petitions in Australian history, every single person involved in this campaign helped shift the Government from a quick political fix to a serious response' (GetUp! 8 June 2011). GetUp! also stated that as a consequence of hundreds of

thousands of Australians joining together they were able to hold politicians to account for their policies and the lack of an acceptable response to stakeholders connected to this crisis. Links to online polls being hosted by Sky News were also posted as well as links to rural media articles such as 'Farmers fight export bans on the web', Weeklytimes Now (2011).

Democracy in action, online

Stakeholders embraced social media to communicate their position on the issue. In an Australian first, beef farmers used social media to fight back after the Federal Government suspended live cattle exports to Indonesia. Australians Supporting Beef Farmers (ASBF) received 10,001 votes of support registered at their website and two Save Live Export Facebook pages produced 3,500 'likes'on their page. Facebook pages established by the ASBF united and connected farmers attempting to come to terms with the implications of the government's suspension (Neilson 2011). Neilson (2011) reported it was perhaps the first time farmers had used the internet to make support networks and offer an alternative opinion to fast-paced campaigns run by animal welfare lobbyists. ASBF (2011) also made use of its website to raise funds for a commercial for YouTube, which was then distributed to all federal MPs. Social media can remove barriers to collective action and empower citizens to influence and monitor the work of policy makers by 'offering low-cost, and in some cases, more personal and compelling means of raising funds, spreading information and recruiting supporters from a broad range of backgrounds' (Clarke 2010: 5).

This analysis illustrates the diversity and extent of the coverage the crisis received online. It also highlights the need for interactive communication during crisis events. While legal restrictions, bureaucratic complexity and the lack of control over the medium challenge governments attempting to manage crises online, 'no response online may be synonymous with no comment', the cardinal sin of crisis management (Taylor and Perry 2005: 216).

Conclusion

Building relationships and engaging in dialogue with online influencers allows the government the opportunity to harness some of the power of social media, particularly its immediacy and reach. They need to be part of the conversation to debate the issues that lead nightly news bulletins and occupy the front pages of broadsheet newspapers, and now also take place online. The importance of social media channels in providing insight and building online relationships would enhance rather than impede any government's chance of being returned for another term (Briones *et al.* 2009). The web has empowered new stakeholder voices that a responsive

government cannot ignore (Solis and Breakenridge 2009). The role of activists and stakeholders reacting to governments' decisions is not new. What is new is the speed and pervasiveness of the public discussion, which in this crisis demonstrated the government's inability to respond in a timely manner to minimise the repercussions on its reputation.

The use of social media can support a government's strategic communication efforts, inform, seek opinions and positions from relevant publics, ultimately serving as a useful crisis communication tool. The problem for the government in this crisis was in how it responded (Weick 1995). Communication prior, during and after a crisis is one of the most significant influencers in determining the longevity of the impact on the government and its reputation (Coombs 1999). The government needs to be prepared in advance and engage with and harness the power of the internet in their crisis communication (Perry et al. 2003), if their goal is re-election.

Limiting the ill-effects of the crisis on the public's perception of the government should be the government's priority. The government's response to any crisis should begin with listening and observing, then participating in the dialogue online (Solis and Breakenridge, 2009). Everything the government does online contributes to the public's perception of its performance and ability to govern. Social media, as with any tool, can work either positively or negatively. Engagement alone does not advance the government's reputation. However, it does mean at least they are part of the game. In the online space, governments must try to influence the influencers and much of this work needs to take place before the conversation online begins.

This paper is primarily concerned with the effect social media has on the political process in the handling of crises. Social media proponents suggest the forums promote accountability, transparency and public engagement with political institutions on topics of interest to voters (Clarke 2010). Sceptics argue social media has simply provided a platform for activists to relocate online. It has been argued that social media is a field where protagonists can engage in open and transparent debate on issues of public interest with a view to effecting change. The live export crisis clearly illustrates this point. It suggests that crisis management is now about arguing a case in the court of public opinion online and influencing other stakeholders to join the conversation to pressure decision makers and effect political change. Conversations are taking place online now, with or without the government's involvement and response. If the government chooses not to be 'part of the conversation, answers, questions, suggestions complaints, observations, and eventually incorrect perceptions will go unmanaged, unresolved

and unchallenged (Solis and Breackenridge 2009: 153). In the court of public opinion, voters who feel respected by a government during a crisis will respond in the way they see fit at the next election.

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after rain   (lane cove river)

after rain   the
scooped holes
hold pools of

fresh water   from
this rock platform
you can see right up

the river   see
the smoke from
the other campfires

but we are here   we
know who belongs
to the smoke we

know the river   the
ebb & flow
we know when

the wallabies come   to
drink and when to
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