

Lighthouse in the Mist: State Governors' Crisis Communication on Twitter During the Early Stage of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has explored the interactions between public leaders and citizens through social media channels. However, there is a gap in our understanding regarding the communication of limited information to the public during times of crisis. This study focuses on the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis scenario and investigates how state governors utilized Twitter to communicate with the public, as well as the subsequent impact on citizens' responses. Employing computational social science techniques, this research analyzes a dataset comprising 47,831 tweets posted by U.S. state governors during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic, spanning from March to August 2020. The results affirm the crucial role of social media in crisis communication and offer insights into effective social media strategies for public communication.

KEYWORDS

Computational Analysis, COVID-19, Crisis Communication, Political Engagement, Social Media, State Governor, Twitter

INTRODUCTION

The pivotal role of social media platforms in disseminating crisis-related information has garnered considerable scholarly attention. Prior research has illuminated how these digital channels influence citizens' behavioral responses, opinions, and attitudes across various social and economic dimensions (Boukes, 2019; Eberl et al., 2020). Furthermore, the salience of social media in the realm of political discourse is well-documented (Heiss, Schmuck, & Matthes, 2019). Within the context of crisis communication, social media approaches have been delineated in cases ranging from the Boston Marathon bombing to Hurricane Sandy and the outbreak of the Zika virus (Sutton et al., 2016; Hughes et al., 2014; Philip et al., 2019). These approaches often emphasize the development of enduring trust

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and reciprocal relationships while enhancing citizen engagement (Song & Lee, 2016). However, the significance of social media during crises varies depending on the nature of the crisis. As Chew and Eysenbach (2010) note in their study of tweets about the H1N1 crisis, Twitter is a valuable research tool because, unlike survey methods and other traditional methods, it captures real-time information and can gauge public opinion and engagement as it happens. However, it also poses unique challenges.

Since its onset in December 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a pervasive impact on global communities. The initial wave spanning March to August 2020 in the United States was particularly detrimental (Ryan, 2021). Within this period, political representatives bore a critical responsibility to provide cogent directives that both clarified the gravity of the situation and encouraged compliance with preventative measures. Their influence was particularly pronounced during these early stages when the data landscape was less certain (Grossman et al., 2020). The federal structure of the U.S. allows state governors to enact swift responses, often more rapidly than federal agencies (Fowler, 2020). With the escalating spread of cases in March, social media platforms, particularly Twitter, emerged as instrumental conduits for crisis communication between governors and the public (Tsao et al., 2021). However, most research on successful social media communication revolves around cultivating long-term trust and encouraging citizen interaction (Song & Lee, 2016; Panagiotopoulos et al., 2016). Yet, if these social media influences were not established prior to COVID-19, the effectiveness of such communication strategies would be uncertain.

In light of these considerations, the current study aims to scrutinize the early phase of the pandemic, focusing specifically on how state governors leveraged Twitter (now rebranded as X) for crisis communication and the ensuing impact on citizen engagement. Examining how public leaders communicated in the early phases of a crisis could offer insights not only into agency digital branding but also into communication styles and content tailored to the type and stage of crisis development. Thus, we explore two research questions: How did state governors utilize Twitter to communicate with the public, and how did citizens respond to the state governors on Twitter during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic?

To study these questions, we employed computational methods to analyze 47,831 tweets from all U.S. state governors issued between March and August 2020. Our analysis underscores the indispensable role that social media channels played in mediating governor-citizen interactions during this critical juncture, offering valuable insights for refining both social media strategy and crisis communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Usage During Crisis

In the complex and dynamic milieu of contemporary governance, social media platforms have ascended as indispensable instruments for fostering citizen engagement and disseminating information (Goncalves et al., 2015; Skoric et al., 2016). Increasingly, academic discourse posits social media as supplanting traditional media channels in crisis communication, effectively becoming the primary conduit for the exchange of news and information (Strekalova, 2016; Dwyer & Martin, 2017; Rosengard, Tucker-McLaughlin, and Brown, 2014). One of the most salient features of social media lies in its capacity for synchronous communication, allowing for the real-time evaluation of public sentiment (Bratu, 2016). Additionally, the expansive reach of social media platforms serves to engage a wide-ranging and heterogeneous audience. Such engagement is particularly crucial for facilitating trust and establishing relationships among diverse constituents, including digitally native younger citizens who are habitual social media users (Popescu & Preduscu, 2016). Consequently, political actors are increasingly cognizant of the imperative to elevate their visibility among their constituencies by utilizing these interactive digital tools (Karlsen, 2011).

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