

Citizen Journalism in Crisis Communication: Lessons from Kenyatta National Hospital, Kenya

Mohan Masaviru

Communication studies Lecturer at Technical University of Mombasa

Abstract

The study is concerned with the recurrent crises at Kenyatta National Hospital (KNH) in Nairobi Kenya. KNH has faced three crises in a span of less than three months at the facility between January 2018 and March 2018. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role that citizen journalism played in reporting the crises, secondly the reaction by KNH management in reducing the impact of crises. The paper also explores how to strategically deal with multiple crises affecting an organization in short duration of time by considering citizen journalism impact on the same.

Keywords: Citizen Journalism, Crisis communication, Crises

1. Introduction and Background

The study is concerned with the recurrent crises at Kenyatta National Hospital (KNH) in Nairobi Kenya. The Hospital has faced three major crises that are known and reported in the media. They are: the stolen baby crisis, near-rape cases of new mothers and the head surgery done on a wrong patient. The mentioned crises happened in a span of less than three months at the facility between January 2018 and March 2018.

The purpose of this paper therefore is to examine the role that citizen journalism played in reporting the crises and the reaction of Kenyatta National Hospital management in reducing the impact of the escalating crises. The paper also explores how to strategically deal with multiple crises affecting an organization. This is because current crises at Kenyatta National Hospital have left it vulnerable to the ever increasing role of citizen journalists as the source of news rather than consumers of news ([www.theopennewsroom](http://www.theopennewsroom.com), 2018).

2. Kenyatta National Hospital; an overview

KNH is the oldest public hospital in Kenya founded in 1901. It has a bed capacity of 1800+ and offers medical and surgical services. It is a referral hospital for the Ministry of Health and also the teaching hospital for University of Nairobi College of Health Sciences. It is located in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya (www.knh.or.ke).

Motto: We listen, we care

Vision: A world class patient-centred specialized care hospital

Mission: to optimize patient experience through innovative, evidence based specialized healthcare facilitate training and research; participate in national health policy formulation. www.knh.or.ke.

According to the post on www.nairobineew.nation.co.ke on 19th January, 2018, new mothers at KNH had complained of near-rape by male staffers at night. This was supported by several Facebook posts from mothers who were nearly raped by KNH male staffers during the night. The security at night was a concern as mothers have to move from the ground floor, where they reside, to the third floor where the nursery is. This journey is a risky affair as male staffers especially morgue attendants attempt to rape the new mothers. The mothers reported that nurses at the hospital have advised them to go in groups or not to use the lifts alone. Others were advised to scream if they hear the sound of trolleys being pushed by morticians. The post by citizen journalist Ms. Mildred Owiso gave voice to other mothers who had undergone the same ordeal to come out on Facebook.

However the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Lily Koros, issued a statement denying the claims and requested anyone who had information on the same to come forward. She defended the morticians as being trained and uniformed. She also added that KNH has 24 hour CCTV cameras for security reasons. www.standardmedia.co.ke/u.report.

On 18th February, 2018 another crisis hit KNH. A woman stole a three-week old baby and later found at slum area in Nairobi, Kenya. A neighbour (citizen journalist) called the police when he saw Ms. Edna Mabuka with a newborn yet she had reportedly miscarried. Another citizen journalist, Graham Kajilwa, added more news on the incident by claiming how long it took for the child to be stolen from the parents. He shed more light on how the thief (Edna Mabuka) monitored the parents for 10hours and stole the baby in a span of 7minutes.

KNH this time round did not deny but rather released a statement informing the public that they had reported the matter to the police and it was under investigation www.the-star.co.ke. KNH statement further mentioned how deeply they were concerned about reuniting the child with the parents and warned patients not to entrust their children to strangers (Simon Ithai, KNH Communication Manager) www.sde.co.ke.

According to citizen journalist, Wambui Mbutia, on 2nd March, 2018 angry Kenyans on Twitter expressed their anger through harsh tweets on head surgery mix-up at KNH. The head surgery was performed on wrong

patient because of mix up when tagging the two patients. The CEO, Lily Koros, informed the media of the sacking of four medics who were on duty that fateful night (neurosurgeon, the ward nurse, theatre receiving nurse and the anesthetist) u.report www.standardmedia.co.ke. The statement by Koros also mentioned the fact that KNH deeply regrets the wrong surgery and exuded confidence that the patient was is in recovery and progressing well.

3. Citizen Journalism

Citizen journalism is defined as individuals or audiences that take an active role in collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news. It is also noted that citizen journalism grew with the growth of interactive features on the internet (www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=citizenjournalism).

The internet has created a new platform for everyone to be a journalist so long as one has channel, an opinion or the story. Citizen journalists do not need any formal training however; their opinions have gained prominence and influence (Atieno, 2013). Citizen journalism is slowly edging out mainstream media and news established sources that were considered the gatekeepers.

The above is attributable to the fact that citizen journalism provides an avenue for the audiences to provide the media with content, opinion and publish it rather than consuming it. These avenues include: blogs, social network sites among others that allow the citizen journalist to share videos, photographs, text, voice messages as well as eye witness account as the story breaks and develops. As supported by Gillmor (2008) citizen journalist covers the moment and not the aftermath and it has also increased the democratic space as the audience can share their story and express their opinion freely without the limitations of ascribing to particular codes thereby weakening mainstream media as gatekeepers.

However, several critics have opined that citizen journalism does not operate within the confines of ethical codes and standards of a traditional professional journalist because they want freedom without responsibility. With this freedom and without editorial controls, many citizen journalists can falsify news or report inaccuracies that can cause damage to a person or an organization in the story. This is noted as possible because some citizen journalists remain anonymous and their sources are unverifiable.

One such case involved Steve Jobs' false report on having suffered a heart attack which adversely affected Apple share price (Harmanci, 2008). Therefore, citizen journalism overlooks the major tenets of professional journalism that include fairness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality and balance in reporting news. By overlooking the verification process of trained and experienced journalists, citizen journalism leaves room for inaccuracies in news gathering, reporting and dissemination even in a time of crisis (www.theopennewsroom, 2018).

Nevertheless, it has been noted that citizen journalism is a source of news for mainstream media because these user created content finds it ways in the mainstream media. It is also important to note that citizen journalism is dependent on the mainstream but it keeps the news current thereby enriching mainstream media. However according to Paulussen, et. al., (2007 as cited in www.theopennewsroom, 2018) citizen journalism practices are focused more on social rather than political participation, they may be rather incidental than structural, and they express the need for community, for sharing, bonding, connectedness and interaction.

There is need for mainstream media and citizen journalism to create a mass communication culture that converge the two as they put power in citizens who can break the news but the mainstream media professionally angles the news to ensure ethics are adhered to as traditional gatekeepers.

3.1 Journalism for citizenship or Journalism as Citizenship

The theories or models that have grounded citizen journalism have always centered on the concept Journalism for citizenship and Journalism as Citizenship. And as noted in the scholarly world, the two theorizing models have received criticism in equal measure (Campbell, n.d).

Journalism for Citizenship

The journalism for citizenship model makes the assertions that the role of the journalist is to inform the citizens and when the citizens are informed, they participate in the much needed democratic space created by the media. The informed citizens then assume the role of monitorial citizens and they can respond to information available to them when needed. However the model views citizens as passive in information flow in society (Campbell, n.d).

Journalism as Citizenship

In this sense, citizen journalism becomes an important resource for actualizing citizens in terms of both information provision and information production, although few studies have explored this relationship. Therefore, the activities of such citizen journalists seem in these conceptions to be more about the construction and maintenance of individual citizen identities than about journalism and when citizens are actualized, they are more likely to chose and use online platforms rather than traditional media (Livingstone & Markham 2008).

4. Crisis

According to Fearn-Banks (2007) a crisis is a major occurrence with potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name. Cornelissen (2008) noted that a crisis may require not just a decisive measure but also urgent action from an organization due to mounting pressure from the public, media attention and customers. Bernstein (2011), stated that a crisis becomes a critical and intense issue that threatens the very existence of an organization in terms of its mission, values and operations. Crises therefore, emphasize the importance of studying crisis communication and management within an organization is to ensure that the organization's image is restored (Bernstein, 2011).

4.1 Crisis Communication

According to Fearn-Banks (2007) crisis communications refers to the dialogue between the organization and its public prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence. The dialogue outlines strategies and tactics designed to mitigate damage to the image of the organization after effectively managing the crisis.

However, it is important to note that effective crisis management depends on crisis communication. This is because comprehensive crisis communication plan and or crisis communication preparedness in an organization will be ineffective if crisis communication is not strategically done. The essence of anticipating crises is to ensure an organization comes out of the crisis with a positive reputation than it had before the crises happened (Fearn-Banks, 2007).

4.2 Crisis Communication and Citizen Journalism

Tucker and Melewar (2005) argue that news media and internet are certainly a substantial threat to any corporate reputation since the public are more sensitive to a corporate scandal. The public learns about a crisis through mainstream media and online social media, therefore the mainstream media and citizen journalism play a critical role in affecting people's perception in a crisis (Coombs, 2006). Therefore, what an organization says and does during/after a crisis can affect a variety of important crisis communication outcomes including the organizational reputation because citizen journalism remains a threat as it generates and escalates the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2009).

Choosing appropriate crisis communication responses mitigates negative public perceptions as a result of citizen journalism escalating the crises (De Blasio & Veale, 2009). This is because crisis creates a demand for immediate and reliable information and quick responses to help fill the gaps created by the crisis. Therefore, crisis communication serves this purpose of providing responses after the citizen journalist exposes the crisis. Failure to do so may result in rumors, speculation, and misinformation that may prove detrimental to the organization and its image (Fearn-Bank, 2007).

4.3 Crisis Communication Process

Coombs, (2007) crisis communication process can be diagrammatically summarized as in figure 1. The figure shows what needs to be done at each stage of managing a crisis.

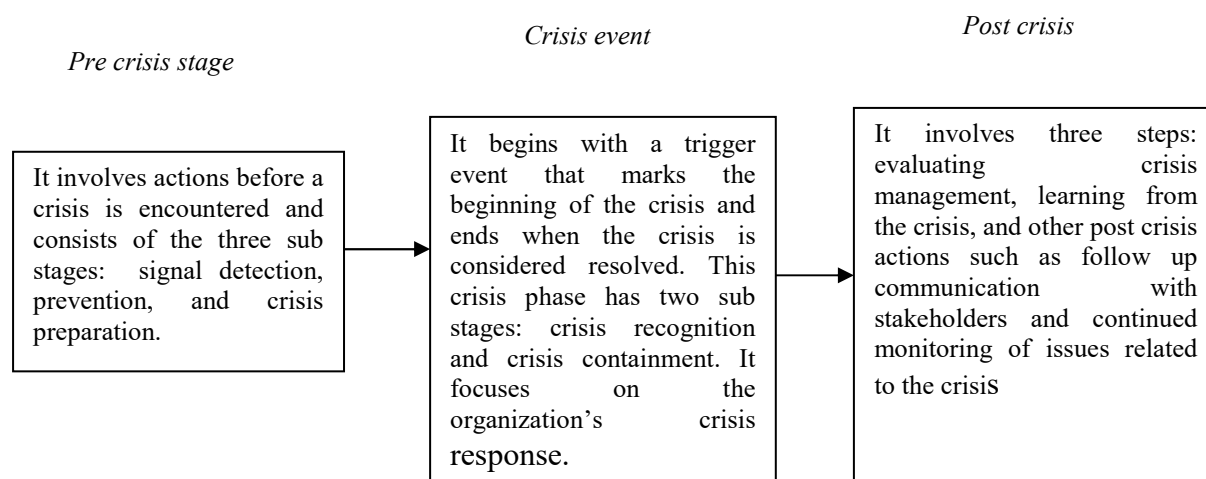


Figure1: Crisis Communication Process

5. The Convergence of SCCT and Image Restoration Theories in Crises Communication

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Image Restoration theory have several aspects that interrelate when addressing the crisis response strategies.

The two theories both look at the crisis situation and propose several response strategies of how to mitigate the

severity of the crisis to organization’s reputation or image. They both view the connection between the type of crisis and the response strategy. They both show which response strategy will be more effective to a particular crisis (Morales, 2017). Lastly, both of them are centered on the audience or the public.

Table 1. SCCT Summary

| Strategy Response | Denial | Diminish | Rebuilding | Bolstering |
|-----------------------|---|--|---|--|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attack the accuser • Denial • Scape-goating | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excuse • Justification | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compensation • Apology | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reminding • Ingratiation • Victimage |
| When is it effective? | The above strategies are used as the initial responses and when victims are present or potential victims | The above two strategies are effective when there is accidental crises and no factors increase the intensity of the crises | The above two strategies are effective when there is intentional and accidental crises with factors that increase the intensity of the crises | The above strategies are used when the organization has good reputation in the past |

5.1 Image Restoration Theory

Image Restoration Theory identifies a typology of 5 major communication strategies that can be used to restore image and reputation when an individual or organization’s image is threatened or is in crisis (Kessadayurat, 2011). The strategies are: Denial, Reducing Offensiveness, Evading Responsibility, Corrective Action, and Mortification.

With Image Restoration Theory, full apology (mortification) has very high acceptance, where the organization takes responsibility for the crisis and requests forgiveness from stakeholders. There is also high acceptance for corrective action, where the organization conveys a notion that actions are being taken to prevent a recurrence of the crisis; while a denial strategy has no acceptance even when the crisis occurred accidentally.

6. Lessons from Kenyatta National Hospital Crises

The communication manager at KNH was in the shadows of the crises that happened at the facility. His role seemed redundant. The communication manager at KNH ignored the importance of communicating during a crisis. This is because communication is frequently tolerated as a secondary issue much less important than ‘managing’ the crisis; the more reason why the CEO at KNH was at the forefront. Crisis communication at KNH has low status for a variety of reasons as other organizations. The corporate communication or public relations departments are synonymous with media relations. These departments are in charge of generating publicity or providing information about the organization when things are fine. They are rarely seen as managers or counselors to senior managers and therefore the case for KNH is not different as the CEO was left to run the crisis communication and crisis management which is supposed to be the sole responsibility of the communication manager (Marra, 1998).

Crisis communication should be left to the communication manager who is the expert in knowing what to say and how to say it. This is important because the CEO’s denial response about the near-rape cases at KNH was received with a lot of aggression from citizen journalists unlike when the communication manager, Ithai, responded to the crisis of the stolen baby being apologetic and remorseful. As a matter of fact, the CEO’s denial strategy had no acceptance even when the crisis occurred accidentally. The CEO should have used full apology (mortification) because it has very high acceptance, where the organization takes responsibility for the crisis and requests forgiveness from stakeholders. There is also high acceptance for corrective action, where the organization conveys a notion that actions are being taken to prevent a recurrence of the crisis. She could also use compensation strategy because it is effective when there is both intentional and accidental crises with factors that increase the intensity of the crises.

According to Marra (1998) excellent crisis management cannot exist without excellent communication. Excellent crisis communication requires the ability to provide information to an organization’s relevant publics almost immediately. Organizations, therefore, need to give its public relations staff the necessary autonomy to talk with these audiences. However, in the case of KNH, the communication manager seemed oblivious to this vital role he is supposed to play. Through citizen journalism, the crises were escalated to irredeemable proportions that saw the suspension of medics at KNH and the CEO being sent on compulsory leave by the Cabinet Secretary. In addition, KNH has bad working relations with the media and that is why the media including citizen journalist were able to speculate, According to Mbui (2016) organizations need to establish a good working relationship by working closely with the media in order to avoid media speculation and untruths. Organizations also need to immediately provide customers with explanations and information during a crisis that go beyond the basic information provided by stories in the mass media. These roles are supposed to be the responsibility of the communication manager in order to mitigate the crises.

Thirdly, every organisation or institution should anticipate crises and seek ways to avert the crisis or mitigate the effects. This can efficiently be done by having a crisis management plan in place as well as a crisis management team (Marra, 1998; Mbui, 2016). With reference to the three crises described above, there seem to be no crisis management plan or team at KNH. The erratic performance and communication errors made by the CEO clearly showcased the lack of crisis management team and plan. This responsibility of informing the public is often delegated to an organization's media relations officer not the CEO. It is their job to gather and disseminate information about the crisis to reporters. The lack of a crisis management plan and team only made matters worse through citizen journalism because KNH did not strategically counter the news spread by the mass media including citizen journalists. It is noted when the internal publics have crisis communications preparedness, then the organization can use denial strategy, evasion of responsibility, offensiveness of the crisis, corrective strategy or mortification very effectively. Or use SCCT strategies such as attack the accuser, denial, scape-goating, excuse, justification, compensation, apology, reminding, ingratiation and victimage. However, it is important to prepare for specific responses and have post crisis review (Watson, 2007). When the story of Tylenol poisoning ran in the media, it meant that another action needed to be taken to rescue the situation. A crisis team was set up which also handled decisions in the area of communication. In the case of Tylenol Johnson & Johnson managed to handle the crisis and recover from it successfully by having some sort of plan and a level headed public relations officer who communicated to the internal publics.

The escalation and recurrence of crises at KNH brought in the critical aspect of Citizen Journalism. Citizen journalism provides an avenue for the audiences to provide the media with content, opinion and publish it rather than consuming it. It has also increased the democratic space as the audience can share their story and express their opinion freely without the limitations of ascribing to particular codes thereby weakening mainstream media as gatekeepers Gillmor (2008). KNH communication should be aware that with citizen journalism, news can be created and spread (accurate on inaccurate) very fast. However, KNH should have grabbed this opportunity instead of depending on others to tell the story. It is recommendable that organizations such as KNH need to create dark or deep web to their threats. This would have helped KNH to launch a blog or website dedicated to the crises mentioned above. Having a strong presence on the social media platform will leverage your own citizen journalists. With the right digital tools in place, KNH team would have the ability to offer a different perspective based on fact, not fiction about the multiple crises that affected it. Another advantage of playing offense in a crisis situation is the ability to quickly counter misinformation caused by the citizen journalist.

7. Conclusion

As noted in several studies, no organization is immune to crises. As the case of KNH, organization will face crises and they can be multiple or multifaceted in nature. Therefore any reputable organization must anticipate crises and have a crisis communication and management plan. A communication plan ensures crisis communication preparedness in an organization as the institution forms a team that will handle the pre-crisis, during crisis and post crisis periods. The plan should include the strategies to deal with citizen journalism.

Dealing with multiple and or multifaceted crises requires a complexity approach that will involve the use of both SCCT and Image Restoration Theories strategies as well as citizen journalism. A complex approach that puts the crisis communication team, headed by a specialist in crisis communication, at the forefront of managing the crises through a complex communication strategy should be used.

KNH did not make use of their communication manager in mitigating or averting the three crises. This can be attributable to the fact that the CEO overshadowed the communication specialist during the crises. The response from the CEO during the head surgery crisis shows how she was able to learn from her earlier mistake of denial in the near-rape crisis to mortification or rebuilding. However, the citizen journalists were annoyed because of KNH already damaged image and therefore wanted her to be sacked.

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