

Public Abstract

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Title: SOURCE CREDIBILITY AND THE PERSUASIVENESS OF PUBLIC SAFETY MESSAGES COMMUNICATED VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media communication networks such as Twitter and Facebook are changing the way organizations and communities alert the public of timely public safety information related to natural disasters, man-made events or other crises. The informal nature of social media can create conflict between official organizational sources and individual sources.

This quantitative study sought to understand whether organizational sources are more credible and persuasive than individual sources during times of crisis.

110 adult residents of a suburban Texas community were asked to view simulated public safety messages presented within a social media channel, and then complete a short survey assessing the credibility and persuasiveness of the messages they viewed.

The 2x2 factorial post-test only experiment found that within social media, organizational sources are significantly more credible, $F(1, 108)=40.62, p<.001$, and significantly more persuasive, $F(1, 108)=9.4, p=.003$, than individual sources when communicating timely public safety information, regardless of message content. When the results were controlled other factors such as perceived risk, attitude and user involvement, organizational sources were still found to be significantly more credible than individual sources, but not significantly more persuasive. Alerts that were perceived to be more credible were also perceived to be more persuasive, regardless of source, $r(108) = .382, p < .001$.

The findings of this pilot study offer rich opportunities for future research in the area of source credibility within social media, and should provide valuable information for practitioners responsible for communicating with the public in times of crisis.