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# Crisis Communication and Social Media

/ A best practice guide from the CIPR's  
/ Crisis Communications Network





## Foreword

The CIPR Crisis Communications Network was established in September 2021 and three years later has 900 members based in over 40 countries, together with more than 2,500 followers on LinkedIn. Our purpose is to promote excellence and share best practice in crisis communication. We are an open and inclusive forum where CIPR members, and others, from across the globe come together to discuss and explore lessons from crisis case studies, past and present.

We bring the latest academic and real-world thinking in crisis communication and reputation risk to the widest audience of PR and communication professionals through a regular series of cutting-edge events and original content for our website [ciprcrisiscommsnetwork.com](http://ciprcrisiscommsnetwork.com). This publication is the second in a new series of crisis communication best practice guides.

**CIPR Crisis Communications Network Co-Chair, Katherine Sykes Chart.PR, FCIPR**



## Preface

In this guide, we explore the challenges and opportunities that social media presents during a crisis. By guiding you through essential steps – from mitigation to management to recovery – we aim to provide practical strategies to help you be well prepared for handling crises.

We have also curated expert insights and real-world case studies to offer fresh perspectives. At the end of the guide, you will find a list of further reading, courses and qualifications to help continue developing your skills in this area.

**Editorial director of this guide and CIPR Crisis Communications Network Committee Member, Felix Östman MCIPR**

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# Introduction

Social media has ushered in a new era of crisis communication. Or has it? Certainly, the speed and reach of social media has had a profound impact. We used to talk about the 'golden hour' following a crisis when an organisation could gather its thoughts and choose how to react. Today we are more likely to be aiming for a response within 15 minutes and then keep up a pulse in terms of updates, sometimes several times a day.

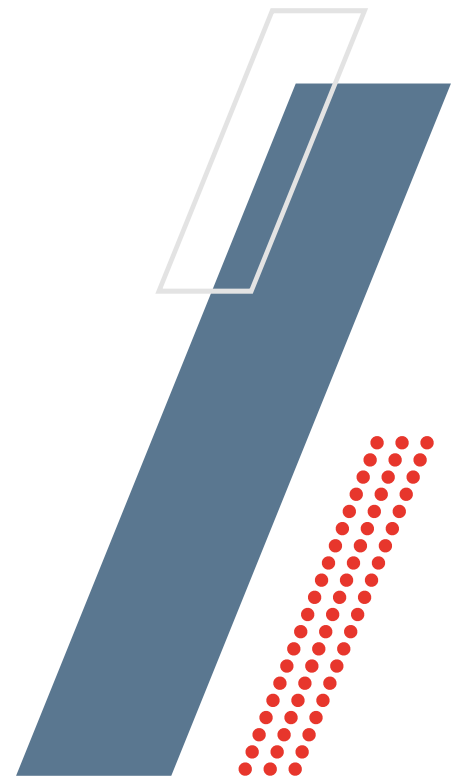
The reach of social media means a crisis can no longer be contained within national borders. What happens 'over there' can very quickly create a crisis 'over here' wherever an organisation has their HQ. It means we need to monitor what is being said globally and be able to respond consistently at a global level.

Put those two factors together and Mark Twain's adage: "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes" is the reality crisis communicators face today in the world of social media.

However, there is another perspective. Social media does in no way do away with the basic principles of good crisis communication. Putting the victims at the heart of everything we do and everything we say, whilst exhibiting 'the five Cs' (Concern, Clarity, Control, Confidence and Competence) in our messaging, whatever the channels we use to get those messages out, remains key. And, of course, good crisis management will always involve good stakeholder management.

Finally, it is worth remembering that social media is not just a threat when it comes to crisis communication. While it is true that social media can amplify criticism and make more people aware of the situation, it also offers new communication opportunities if you are well-prepared and have a strategy in place. Social media and other online channels, such as websites, are a great way to communicate directly to stakeholders in a crisis. The mainstream media remain important, but these new online and social media channels allow us in an unmediated way to get our organisation's crisis narrative across and correct what is being said elsewhere.

**CIPR Crisis Communications Network Co-Chair, Chris Tucker MCIPR**





# (Our) definition of social media

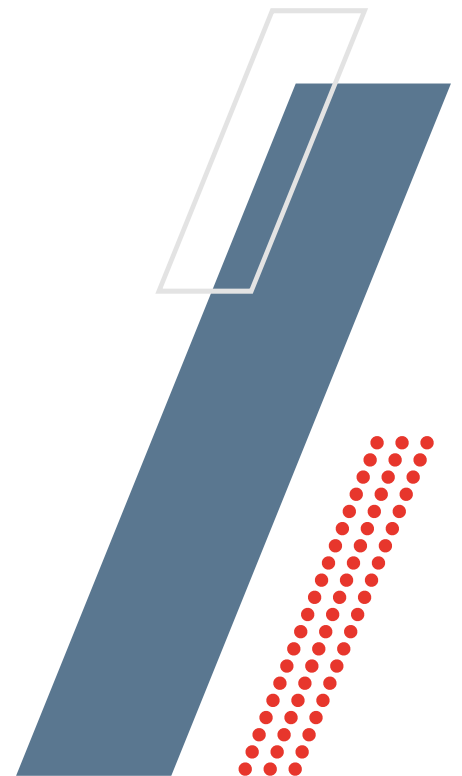
## What do we mean by social media?

Traditionally and simplistically, from an organisational perspective social media may be considered to be any platforms upon which posts can be published to reach a target audience. Such platforms might include, for example, Facebook, X and LinkedIn. They may also allow the target audience to interact directly with the organisation, for example, by commenting on a post.

However, social media is much more complex than this. Viewing social media through the traditional 'sender and receiver' communication theory will not enable you to fully utilise its power. And, from a crisis communication perspective, this approach will never make you fully prepared. Social media as a medium is constantly evolving, with new platforms emerging, new ways of interacting developing, and the types of engaging content changing.

In the early days of social media, people often openly shared everything with all of their friends through text and pictures. Recently, we have seen a shift to closed group chats, for example on WhatsApp, separate Instagram accounts for closed circles, or alternatively the opposite – thoroughly curated pieces of one's life shared with everyone on platforms such as TikTok.

Therefore, in this guide we define social media as platforms where people can interact digitally, either publicly or privately, with a group of people. This can take the form of a TikTok video, for example, or a group message in a WhatsApp group, or a text and image post on LinkedIn.





# Social media during a crisis: the different stages

To help you prepare to handle a crisis through social media, this guide is built around the five-stage model of a crisis.



<sup>[1]</sup> For the purposes of this guide, we have used ‘mitigation’ in the broad sense of minimising or lessening risks, rather than solely limiting their impact once those have actually materialised.

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# Mitigate





## Do you listen to what's being said about you 'out there'?

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There are tools that crawl social media platforms to give you a picture of what's being said about you. By having the right set-up, you'll be able to get an early alert when something is about to escalate, giving you an opportunity to act on an issue before it emerges into a crisis. Examples of tools that can support you to do this are Sprinklr, Brandwatch (Cision), and Digimind. If you don't have the budget for tools like these, affordable X Pro can give you a good understanding of what's being said on X.

When choosing a tool, compare which platforms they monitor and what data they provide. Due to user privacy, only fully publicly available social media content is accessible, and many social media platforms limit what these tools can pick up. Be aware that these tools will never give you a full picture of your organisation on social media.

## Have you secured access to your accounts?

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Who has access to your social media accounts? To ensure you are protected from internal and external threats, strong access control for your social media channels is crucial. If you save passwords in a word document with people signing in directly to your social media accounts, you are vulnerable. As a first simple step, ensure multi-factor authentication (MFA) is activated on all your accounts and that passwords are regularly changed. If you represent a larger organisation with many people handling your accounts, use a social media handling platform. These platforms can, for example, ensure that posts are checked by at least two people before being published, and that individuals who leave your organisation no longer have access. They'll also be a huge help once you need to manage a crisis and respond to many messages.

## How are you managing your community?

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As with all crisis communication, if you have built up a strong, trustworthy brand, it will be easier to navigate it through criticism. The same applies to social media. By having strong community management, where you are available outside of crises, engage in direct conversations with your audience, and create engaging content, you are more likely to have an audience who is ready and willing to listen to what you have to say during a crisis.

Make sure that you are able to quickly pause any scheduled posts, if necessary, as you approach an issue or crisis. Day to day marketing-related posts can jar badly when a crisis is in progress.

Many people today prefer to connect with organisations through messaging services such as WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger. This will also be true during a crisis. Ensuring your organisation is talking with people where they normally are will help you with your crisis communication in these channels when the crisis hits.



# From monitoring to prediction to mitigating: the future of AI powered predictive analytics

**By Philippe Borremans,**  
Emergency Risk and Crisis  
Communication Consultant

AI-powered platforms which monitor social media, news and other channels, are no longer foreign to PR and communication professionals: they have become indispensable when it comes to tracking brand sentiment and spotting potential issues before they escalate.

But while AI monitoring has become the industry standard, a new development is emerging that promises to take crisis communication to the next level: AI-powered predictive analytics.

## Why predictive analytics is important

Imagine not only recognising a looming crisis but being able to predict it before it even shows up on the radar. AI-powered predictive analytics uses data to analyse the past or present, but also to predict future trends. It's like a crystal ball, except it's not magic: it is driven by complex algorithms and machine learning models.

For PR and communication professionals, this shift from observation to prediction is an important change. Predictive analytics can forecast potential crises based on patterns and correlations that are invisible to the human eye. By analysing historical data, current trends and external factors, these AI tools can predict how a situation might develop and give communication teams the valuable time they need to prepare for, or even prevent, a crisis.

## A new standard in crisis preparation

With predictive analytics, PR teams can move from a reactive to a proactive stance. Instead of dealing with a situation after it has already occurred, communication professionals can anticipate and mitigate risks before they develop into a full-blown crisis.

Take, for example, a scenario where a company is coming under increasing public scrutiny for its environmental practices. Traditional AI monitoring would alert the team as soon as negative sentiment builds. However, predictive analytics could identify the issue weeks in advance and allow the company to respond proactively to the concerns, whether that's by adjusting its practices, launching a targeted communications campaign or preparing key messages hopefully preventing a crisis from emerging.



# United Airlines: The importance of the 'camera test' to understand the risks you run

Social media brings wide reach. It also brings about greater transparency. Taken together, these can present communication challenges and potentially lead to crisis.

Airlines overbook all the time. In April 2017, United Airlines found that it needed additional seats on one of its aircraft to get members of its crew to another airport. Despite the airline offering US\$800, no passenger was willing to give up their seat, possibly because it was a Sunday night and the next flight was not due to leave until 3.00pm the following day.

Airline staff boarded the plane and selected four people to eject. Three did so voluntarily but the fourth – Dr David Dao – refused to leave saying he had patients to see the following day. An eyewitness said the man was “very upset” about the possibility of being bumped and attempted to call his lawyer. An airline manager told him that security would be called if he did not comply.

At this point, security officers came to speak to him, first one then two more. Subsequently Dr Dao was yanked from his seat onto the floor and dragged off the plane, blood visible on his face.

United Airlines was technically within its rights to forcibly remove Dr Dao for refusing to leave the flight (this is permitted as part of the airline's carriage guidelines) but such instances are very rare. Doubtless few, if any, of us will be aware that passengers can be removed from a plane in this way. Clearly shocked by the incident, some passengers filmed it on their mobile phones and uploaded the footage to social media channels. The videos soon went viral and in just

six hours, the posts spiked with 125,000 unique mentions on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, leaving United Airlines with a real crisis on its hands.

United Airlines' CEO's initial response was criticised as being tone deaf. The airline apologised for having to “re-accommodate these customers” but did not address the actual incident or what had happened to Dr Dao. This poor response was compounded further when, in an email to all employees, the CEO praised the crew's actions and called the passenger “disruptive and belligerent.”

Unsurprisingly, the crisis accelerated and drew headlines around the world. Consequently, the airline was forced to issue new statements in which the incident was described as “truly horrific.” The CEO took to TV to promise such an event would never happen again and issued a public apology to Dr Dao and his family. Moreover, the CEO's contract of employment was amended to ensure that he could not be promoted to Chairman.

Crisis communication professionals should always consider the 'camera test'. Does your organisation have any policies or processes that you would not want filmed and viewed by millions of people around the world? If those policies and processes cannot be changed, then a crisis communication plan must be devised that enables a quicker and more sympathetic response than that shown by United Airlines.

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# Prepare





# Prepare

## Have you included social media in your crisis communication plan?

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Social media planning for a crisis must never be siloed from other crisis communication planning. Due to the nature of social media activity, the risk of getting the message and tone wrong is disproportionately high. In normal times, communication on social media is uniquely real-time and conversational: it typically flourishes in stable conditions when a select few manage the channel with a deep and shared corporate knowledge.

A crisis often requires a rapid change of pace, message content and tone, and how this can be achieved swiftly and seamlessly needs careful prior consideration. In a crisis, always consider the dynamic impact of the real-time and iterative nature of social media, whilst also listening carefully to judge sentiment.

This planning can be done directly in your crisis communication plan or as a separate appendix. We have included an example of an appendix [at the end of this guide](#).

## Have you trained and planned for who will handle social media?

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A spike in social media traffic will mean that your organisation will need additional competent in-house or external support to engage with and signpost stakeholders, as well as communicate developments and correct inaccuracies in a timely way.

It is far better to over-estimate the required resource needed for consistent and high-quality social media execution than to find out during a crisis that it is inadequate. Ensure that ample capacity is allocated to integrated social media activity during a crisis. This will mitigate risks and maximise strategic impact.

There are also numerous ways to ensure that everyone who will be handling the crisis is trained and prepared. A crisis simulation is often a good way to do this, and some companies offer immersive crisis simulations which mimic how a crisis could play out on social media platforms.

## Have you considered the impact of different countries and time zones?

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Global organisations need to be prepared for comments on social media in different countries and time zones. Failure to do so means running the risk of failing to respond to comments posted from different countries and in different languages.

A crisis can be regional as well as national. Therefore in order to ensure consistency of tone and message across all channels you should plan your resource, and train your people, across all relevant countries. Social media crisis simulation exercises can be extremely valuable here.



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## Have you prepared your social media channels in advance?

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When in a crisis, you will have to communicate to your audience through your social media channels. In today's communication landscape, this will be one of the most important places where you can communicate your side of the story and try to take control of it. It is unlikely that you will succeed in your crisis management if you stay silent on social media.

To communicate on social media during a crisis is tough. There are many potential pitfalls and if you are unprepared you can escalate the crisis even further. However, advance preparation can help to mitigate the worst impacts of the crisis. Making strategic decisions about which channels to be on at all is a good place to start and the model below will help.

### The POST model

In their seminal book 'Groundswell', Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff observed that when thinking about social media strategy it is common to immediately focus on specific channels: however, because new channels pop up all the time, your focus should really be on your audiences. Their POST model is invaluable for prompting the right questions to ask.

**People** – Where are your audiences to be found? Which channels do they use to obtain their information? Which channels do they trust? In a crisis situation how might this differ from business as normal? For example, the steady decline of traditional media was temporarily reversed during the Covid pandemic.

**Objectives** – What are you seeking to achieve? Some channels work better than others in simply stating what stakeholders need to do in a crisis or by alerting them to danger. For example, some countries, including the UK, have tested an emergency alert that has appeared on all mobile phones. In addition, Facebook has proved to be invaluable in helping individuals to offer help and support to those impacted by any emergency.

**Strategy** – What is it that you want your audiences to do in this crisis? Do you want them to share information? Do you want them to become engaged in resolving the crisis? Having a clear strategy means you can establish measures for success from the outset. You can also ensure better senior management buy-in. Social media can be loud and demanding in a crisis situation so agreeing up front with your senior team when you will engage, what you will take offline and when you will ignore posts enables you to concentrate on the most critical issues.

**Technology** – Now you have decided on the P, the O and the S, are there any technologies you need to build such as a wiki or a hidden web page, in other words sections of your website that are only deployed in crisis? Are you already proficient on the channels that will work for you in a crisis, or do you need to upskill? And finally, how will you create the right content for your chosen channels? Video can be particularly powerful during a crisis as stakeholders want to see senior leaders display the essential qualities of compassion and empathy.



# Dove: Use of social media for marketing can cause crises

The decline in readership of newspapers and magazines, together with reduced audiences for mainstream TV, has presented a challenge to sales and marketing teams.

Unsurprisingly, social media has been seen as a solution given that so many of us now live online. But whilst social media presents a wonderful opportunity to reach consumers, it is interactive in a way that mainstream media advertising is not. Unsurprisingly, a number of crises have arisen on social media as a result of advertising activity.

One such example was Dove, which was forced to issue an apology after posting an advert on its Facebook page that depicted a black woman transforming into a white woman. The ad showed a black woman taking off her top to reveal a white woman underneath, supposedly after using Dove body lotion. The white woman then removed her top, transforming into a Middle Eastern woman.

Following the ad's removal Dove, which is owned by Unilever, tweeted: "An image we recently posted on Facebook missed the mark in representing women of colour thoughtfully. We deeply regret the offence it caused."

In a further statement, Dove explained: "As part of a campaign for Dove body wash, a three-second video clip was posted to the US Facebook page. This did not represent the diversity of real beauty, which is something Dove is passionate about and is core to our beliefs, and it should not have happened. We have removed the post and have not published any other related content. We apologise deeply and sincerely for the offence that it has caused."

Despite the apology, the damage had been done, with nearly 3,000 overwhelmingly negative comments received about the ad. Many social media users called for a boycott of Dove's products, and others noted that this was not the first time the company had faced accusations of racism. In 2011, Dove's before-and-after advert showed a black woman transitioning to a white woman after using its body wash.

In the world before social media, if readers or viewers were unhappy with mainstream media advertising, their only recourse was to write a letter of complaint and/or contact a regulator, such as the Advertising Standards Authority. Today the keyboard warriors are out in force fuelled by the so-called 'culture wars'. For crisis communicators this shows the need for a close relationship between marketing, sales and PR. As an extra tip, consider carefully any planned online marketing activity during an emerging issue or crisis. Often it is a good idea to pause marketing whilst a crisis plays out, and gradually start it again.



# Three steps to effectively use technology to understand or predict a crisis

By Paul Quigley,  
CEO, NewsWhip

Today, crises can emerge from anywhere on a vast social media and news landscape. Fortunately for communication practitioners, the data for tracking and understanding social media has never been stronger, or more real time, but it needs to be set up and leveraged well.

Here is a simple three-step guide to help you leverage technology to stay one step ahead in an increasingly fragmented news and social ecosystem.

## 1. 'Level Set'

All companies have perennially sensitive issues that can lead to crises – product failures, industry activities – think about ongoing issues in food, energy and technology. They can also have detractors in the media, such as opportunistic politicians who want to attack a 'woke' measure, indignant former customers and even social media activists looking for scalps. Some call these 'recurring issues', others 'headwinds' – but all smart teams are now investing in understanding them, however negative or fringe they might be.

Today's data-informed comms teams take time to level set on these issues. They survey the landscape for these headwinds, understand the dominant narratives, and then set their expectation of engagement on each of them. Consider:

- How many articles are generally written about this each day? How much engagement do these articles receive?

- Where does that engagement happen? (fringe, partisan accounts or mainstream news?)
- What's an unusual level of engagement on an article about his topic that I'd want to be alerted to?

Even if your first set of benchmarks is a bit 'finger in the air', having any structure in place precipitates useful conversation, and also has a tremendously calming effect when issues do arise, or appear to arise. If an executive calls you, worried about a viral negative tweet, you can demonstrate whether it is outside the normal range, or just the noise they should expect each day.

Once you have surveyed the landscape and have some idea of benchmarks, you can set up smart, automated monitoring.

## 2. Automate your monitoring

Modern monitoring tools feature increasingly sophisticated alerting and 'push' capabilities.

These can be set up to trigger alerts, and even AI-powered media digests on any issue. Some tools can automatically separate out the more significant stories and events using social engagement or other metrics, based on the benchmarks you established when you completed your 'level set'.

This is where the work done in benchmarking pays dividends, as you can avoid being hit with too many stories, and only be alerted where the overall noise levels rise, or a particular story or post goes viral. You can also spot if a fringe narrative starts to break to mainstream publications and get engagement with their audiences.

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### 3. Bring data to decision making

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In a crisis, data – along with benchmarks and measures of momentum – can provide a critical focus for a crisis response team. Graphs, numbers, and comparisons bring a sense of scale and shape on the issues.

Well prepared benchmarks are enormously helpful here. These can be drawn from your baseline/‘level set’. (For example, “This has resulted in a 25x increase in engagement with stories about our brand”.)

You can draw helpful context from previous similar issues too. Media cycles around product recalls, data breaches and industrial actions can have underlying patterns over day one and day two. Some of our users will layer data from previous events onto what’s happening now, to better predict what’s coming next.

Next, be ready to dig into the posts themselves. While summary graphs and sentiment extraction can be helpful, the actual posts and stories themselves can help reveal the narratives – and narrative opportunities – driving a news cycle. Some news cycles might be playing out very differently with different audiences – for example on politically polarized issues.

Refreshingly, all the up-front work on these processes and technology should reduce later ‘busy work’ for communication practitioners, help enhance wider understanding of the media environment among your stakeholders and enhance your role within your organisation – even when a crisis isn’t happening.



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# Ramp-up





# Ramp-up

## What identifies that something can become a crisis on social media?

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In today's world, many crises begin on social media. If you have set up tools to quickly alert you to posts and conversations that could escalate, you increase the likelihood of reducing potential damage. Posts are more likely to go viral if they are connected to sensitive or controversial topics (e.g. race, gender, politics, religion), if influencers or high-profile individuals start engaging or commenting negatively on the issue, or if the topic begins to attract attention and amplification by mainstream media. Some themes also attract trolls, which can make a post appear more viral and significant than it truly is, even when only a limited number of people are engaging with it.

## When do you engage?

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Each situation is unique, so your approach to engagement may vary depending on the context and severity of the issue. Often, you can limit the damage by addressing concerns early and ensuring they are responded to appropriately. Avoid generic and corporate responses, as well as being too informal in your response. However, there are also times when not engaging is the right approach, as engaging could fuel up the conversations. Deciding when to engage and when not to can become important strategic decisions during a crisis, so good scenario-planning to identify up and coming issues, and test possible responses, is critical.



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# Manage





# Manage

## Are you prepared to utilise the power of social media to support your communication during a crisis?

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Social media platforms offer new ways to communicate your messages directly to your key audiences. If you face a wave of criticism during a crisis, being proactive can help you regain control and effectively share your messaging.

Most platforms offer a live broadcasting function, allowing you to answer questions from your audience in a human and transparent way. Many also have a 'Q&A' feature, enabling you to engage in conversations and ensure you address the questions that matter most to your audience. Additionally, more traditional options, such as posting updates or pre-recorded videos, are available. Many of your senior management team members are likely to have professional social media accounts on platforms such as LinkedIn, which can be utilised as channels during your response. To be able to utilise this, you will need to have invested in planning, training and technical equipment before the crisis hits you.

Consider whether paid social media might be an appropriate option for your crisis response. Through social media advertising, you can narrowly target specific audiences with your messaging; however, this approach does come with risks and may face criticism.

## Defining messaging and tone of voice on social media during a crisis

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Your organisation's core messaging, based on its mission, vision, values and behaviours, sets the parameters for your crisis communication messaging. Drafting high-level crisis messaging is covered in more detail in our first guide, 'Drafting a Crisis Communication Plan'. However, special considerations are needed for social media and, based on the culture and practice of social media, your messaging may need to be more informal in nature in line with your chosen platform.

Successful social media communication can require careful adjustment of tone and messaging in a crisis. Social media must remain real-time and conversational while adapting to the type, circumstances, and stage of the crisis. Misunderstandings can easily occur, especially in stressful situations, so getting the tone right is crucial. Start by considering what different audiences might be experiencing.

Creating profiles of key audiences or stakeholder groups will help your team anticipate their responses and adjust your messaging accordingly. Your tone should be as flexible as the crisis itself. Also, be prepared for the social media channel's purpose to shift – it may switch from light-hearted engagement with consumers to a mechanism to keep stakeholders updated in a timely way about important developments and signposting stakeholders how to access support.



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## Who is responsible for handling social media during a crisis?

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In many organisations, the day-to-day responsibility for social media lies with a different team from the one who handles a crisis. This will pose a challenge when a crisis hits, and you need to decide in advance whether the normal day-to-day social media team will continue the engagement under the instructions of the crisis communication team, or whether the crisis communication team will take over completely. In either scenario, someone in the crisis team will need to have access to all social media accounts so that there is no delay in posting important updates or responding to conversations promptly, even outside office hours. Handling social media conversations during a crisis can be mentally very exhausting, so it is important not to forget the welfare of all team members.



# Slack: Getting tone of voice right

Launched in 2014, Slack is a successful online messaging and collaborative working system which in some ways resembles an internal social media channel. With almost 39 million users, it saw a boost in uptake during the Covid pandemic when remote working became the norm.

However, it has also suffered from several outages and hacks, the most recent in February 2022, during which users of the platform could not send or receive messages, upload files or join channels, and were completely shut out from the desktop application. Technology companies are at high risk of such crises and it appears that Slack had prepared its responses well.

Its first message to frustrated users impacted by the outage was swift, brief but also disarmingly honest: "Sorry we can't be more specific — this is one of those cases where we, too, don't know what's gone wrong."

Throughout the five-hour outage, Slack kept users informed as it worked to find a solution. These messages, which were uploaded roughly every hour, clearly detailed its efforts to reinstate complete access for all customers (see Figure 1).

Slack also used X to interact with users in an authentic, apologetic, yet also playful, tone (see Figure 2).

Once the system was back up and running, the Slack team signed off the crisis on their status page with the message: "Thanks for bearing with us and we apologise for the disruption to your work day!"

Good preparation enables quick and effective response when a crisis hits. As this example demonstrates, getting the right tone of voice is essential in a crisis so good crisis preparedness should include defining what the appropriate tone of voice would be in a crisis and how different, if at all, that would be from normal.

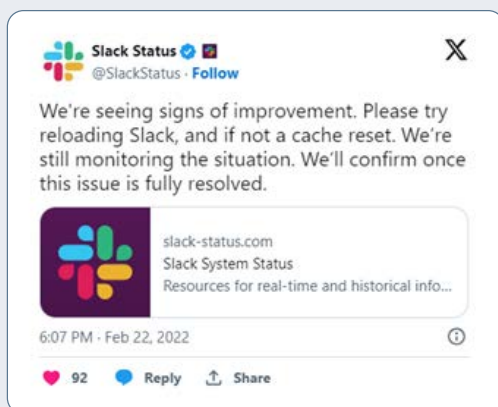


Figure 1.



Figure 2.

# RSPB: Careful management of the social media team

Social media activity has become an increasingly important way for charities to raise their visibility, but it may also lead some of them into crisis.

In August 2023, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) was obliged to publicly state that it was not trying to become politically engaged. This followed a heated thread on its X feed which accused the then Conservative government of lying about their environmental commitments. Not only was the thread very unlike the RSPB's usual measured, firm, professional tone, but the posts were accompanied by what could be viewed as highly provocative images.

One of these depicted images of former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, and government ministers Michael Gove and Thérèse Coffey, with the word "LIARS!" superimposed in red. This sparked a huge debate online about the conduct of charitable organisations which, according to Charity Commission rules, should remain politically neutral. In addition, some MPs called for RSPB to be stripped of its charitable status.

RSPB was quick to retract the statements made on X and to apologise. In an interview with Radio 4, RSPB chief executive Beccy Speight said: "So, the framing of that tweet, where we called out individual people, we felt was incorrect and inappropriate, and we apologise for that."

Reading between the lines it seems that the person(s) responsible for posting to the RSPB's X account allowed their personal frustrations to get the better of them. A reminder then that anyone who is given the responsibility of being the voice of your organisation via social media should be given the appropriate training. Clear guidance and protocols should also be in place to define brand tone of voice, including guidance on political neutrality (if applicable).

Just weeks after the RSPB crisis, the [Charity Commission published guidance on how charities should engage with social media](#).

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# Recover





# Recover

## When is the crisis over and what should be the next steps?

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It is essential to have a clear, practical recovery phase baked into your crisis management and crisis communication plan. A structured recovery phase is even more important for social media-centric crises, with social media often acting as an invaluable proxy for – and guide to – stakeholder sentiment, in the short-, medium- and long-term. The long tail of social media interest might persist well after the crisis has abated.

For social media-heavy crises it is crucial to remember that the reputational and relationship impact of a crisis can continue long after the crisis *appears* to have died down and it is important to focus as much on relationships as on reputation. This is the crucial difference between ‘business as usual’ and ‘reputation as usual’.

With that in mind, it is critical to remember that the recovery phase actually starts long before the post-crisis period itself. After all, your ability to recover (in terms of reputation and relationships) hinges as much on your standing and ‘bank’ of trusted relationships going into the crisis – and your decisions, actions and communication while in its teeth – as on the recovery phase itself. Indeed, it is your approach during the mitigation, preparedness, ramp-up and management phases that sets the context in which you seek to recover.



# Misinformation and disinformation

**Shayoni Lynn,**  
CEO & Founder, Lynn

## What is disinformation? And how does it differ from misinformation?

The definitions typically state that disinformation is the 'proliferation of false information with intent' whereas misinformation is the 'proliferation of false information without intent'. In addition, 'malinformation' is when complete information is not shared, or information is shared without context, which might suit a particular agenda.

The latest misinformation research suggests that intent does not matter. Intentional lies are often malicious but what are the motivations behind the creation of misleading information?

## What about real news?

The way we consume news and information has changed significantly over the past few years and will continue to do so with the growth of generative AI. Due to the nature of misinformation, which is complex and multifaceted, this results in challenges with source credibility and accuracy of information.

Whilst misinformation is not a communications issue, communications will play a key role in managing, and even mitigating, disinformation campaigns. Communication professionals will be on the frontline monitoring, learning and responding to false information, and must upskill to better respond to information threats.

The 2024 UK riots should serve as an example of the power of disinformation – the influence of bad actors, the opportunities afforded by algorithm, and the susceptibility of audiences to believe false narratives and act on them, resulting in real-world consequences.

To beat misinformation, we need to understand it, learn from the techniques deployed, and incorporate the right strategies to better protect our communities.

## Understand the disinformation playbook

The lifetime of a disinformation campaign has specific patterns:

- **Start small** – False narratives typically start small. A lone post here, a couple of posts there. It may seem innocuous enough but for those aware of misinformation strategies, these posts usually contain clues to an upcoming campaign – often with tropes and codes – that point to what might come.
- **Build with bots** – These lone posts are then usually picked up by bots (or other bad actors) who share the content, creating 'noise' that might suggest a narrative is legitimate by virtue of volume alone.
- **Wait for receptive hosts** – This usually attracts receptive hosts – those who will share this content, wittingly or unwittingly, because it serves some benefit to them. For some, such as high-profile 'disinfluencers' it promotes their ideology, engages their audiences, and serves their agenda; for others – the general public – the narratives may conform to their pre-existing beliefs. Using the analogy of the virus, receptive hosts lack an immune system, and will share this narrative, pushing it further into the information ecosystem.

With enough momentum, a disinformation campaign latches on to the public psyche. The spread is rapid and cross-channel, creating monumental amounts of false content which ripple through a virtual population faster than we can imagine.

Without understanding the playbook, we remain on the back foot.

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## Invest in an early warning system

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An active monitoring system, specifically built to identify misinformation, can be an incredibly powerful tool in your arsenal. Providing longitudinal data, an early warning system will identify and flag potential information threats – helping you stay one step ahead.

## Incorporate proactive strategies

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Current academic research shows that it is possible to inoculate against misinformation. Misinformation works by spreading amongst people and communities who are receptive to it. By proactively using inoculation strategies, based on models from behavioural science and epidemiology, we can protect our information ecosystems. Strategies include:

- **Pre-bunking** – The intervention where people are exposed to weakened versions of misinformation in order to build their resilience.
- **Critical thinking and analytical reasoning** – Promoting skills such as scepticism, questioning sources and examining evidence; in other words, helping audiences build capabilities to rationally assess information, rejecting false information even if it conforms to existing beliefs and biases.
- **Simulated exposure** – In experimental settings, testing how audiences react to common misinformation tactics, introducing different interventions (tactics) to help them recognise and resist these. This allows different strategies to be assessed for their effectiveness, within a controlled setting, before scaling up to a larger programme.





# Appendix

As set out in the Prepare section [page 11](#), you should always ensure that social media is integrated into your crisis communication plan. Alternatively you could dedicate a section of your plan specifically to social media, as demonstrated in this example by **Lucy Salvage, Digital Communications Adviser, Local Government Association and former member of the CIPR Crisis Communication Network Committee.**

## Social media appendix to crisis communication plan

### 1. Purpose

This plan provides guidelines for managing and mitigating the impact of a social media crisis. It aims to ensure a prompt, coordinated and effective response to protect [organisation name]'s reputation, maintain public trust, and address the concerns of stakeholders.

### 2. Definition of a social media crisis

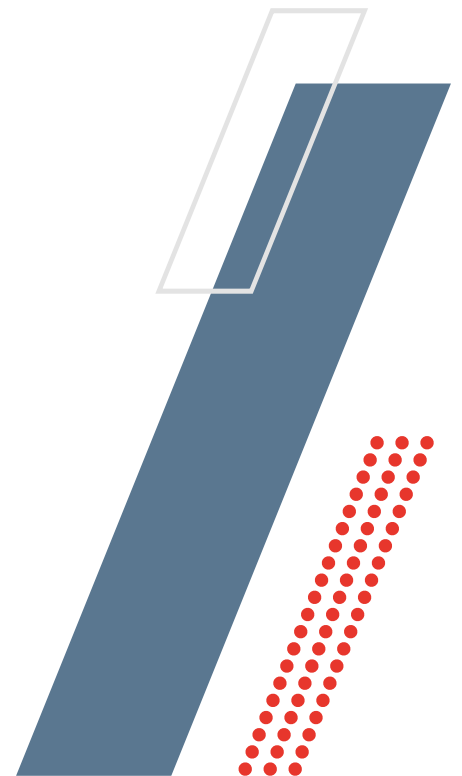
A social media crisis occurs when a negative event, comment, or situation rapidly escalates on social media platforms, potentially damaging [organisation name]'s reputation. You may consider actioning this plan if (one or more may apply):

- Negative posts go 'viral' (i.e. shared far beyond the usual audience, potentially causing reputational harm).
- Misinformation starts to spread widely.
- There is a significant volume of complaints or criticism.
- An incident involving the organisation is being publicly scrutinised via social media (this can be in real-time or after the event).

### 3. Monitoring and identification

The Social Media Lead is responsible for continuous monitoring of social media channels. Tools like [Tool Name] will be used to track mentions, hashtags and keywords related to the organisation. Immediate action will be taken if the following indicators are observed:

- A sudden spike in negative mentions or comments.
- Trending hashtags that negatively reference [organisation name].
- Posts from influencers or media outlets criticising [organisation name].



## 5. Communication channels

Primary channels for crisis communication include:

- Social Media Platforms: X, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn.
- Official Website: For detailed statements and updates.
- Press Releases: For traditional media.
- Email Newsletters: For direct communication with stakeholders.

See the comprehensive corporate crisis communications plan for more detailed information about communications channels.

## 6. Social media crisis response procedures

Set out below is a timetable of the social media crisis response procedure, followed by a more detailed explanation for each stage of the response.

<b>A. Initial response</b> (First 1-2 hours)
<b>B. Fact-finding</b> (Next 2-4 hours)
<b>C. Public response</b> (4-24 hours)
<b>D. Ongoing monitoring and adjustment</b> (24-72 hours)
<b>E. Resolution and recovery</b>

### A.

#### Initial response (First 1-2 hours)

**Acknowledge the issue:**

Acknowledge the situation publicly as soon as possible to show the organisation is aware and taking it seriously. Express concern for and empathise with any victims or other affected individuals.

**Example:** “We are aware of the situation regarding [issue] and are looking into it immediately. We will provide an update shortly once we have established the facts. In the meantime our thoughts are with all those who are/may be affected”.

**Assess the situation:** Gather all available facts and assess the scope of the crisis. Determine if misinformation is involved and clarify the context.

**Assemble the CMT:** Notify all members of the Crisis Management Team and schedule an emergency meeting to discuss the situation.

## B.

### Fact-finding (Next 2-4 hours)

**Gather information:** Collect details about the issue, including what triggered it, the key individuals involved, and how it is being perceived online.

**Consult with the legal team:** Ensure all responses are legally sound and do not inadvertently admit fault or liability.

**Develop key messages:** Draft key messages and responses that address the concerns raised, correct misinformation and convey empathy.

## C.

### Public response (4-24 hours)

**Issue a public statement:** Post an official response across all social media channels.

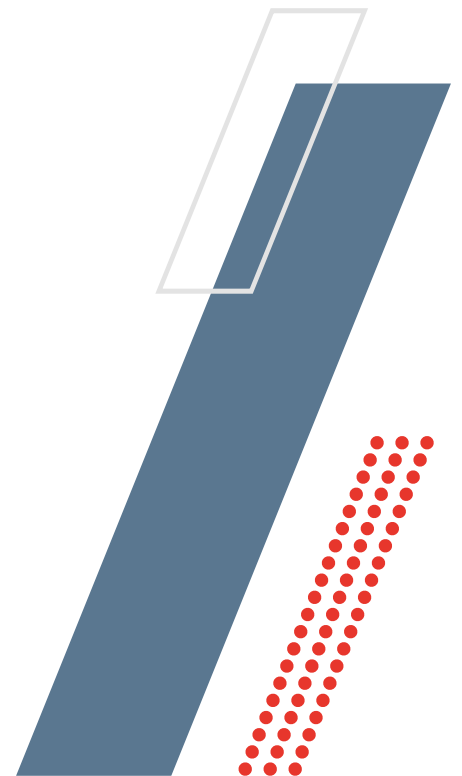
**Key elements:** Acknowledge the issue, provide factual information, explain what actions are being taken. Express concern for and empathise with any victims or other affected individuals. Consider whether an apology may be appropriate in the circumstances.

**Engage with the audience:** Respond to comments and questions, especially those from influencers, media, or affected individuals. Signpost to an online list of FAQs.

**Tone:** Calm, empathetic and professional.

**Avoid:** Engaging in arguments, deleting critical comments (unless they violate policies), or making defensive statements.

**Utilise multimedia:** Use videos, infographics or live streams if necessary to convey complex information or show transparency.



## D.

### Ongoing monitoring and adjustment (24-72 hours)

**Monitor reactions:** Continue monitoring social media for reactions to the response. Adjust the communication strategy as needed based on feedback.

**Provide updates:** Regularly update the public on the progress of the situation, especially if new information becomes available.

**Engage with media:** Work with the Communications Lead to manage traditional media enquiries and ensure consistent messaging.

## E.

### Resolution and recovery

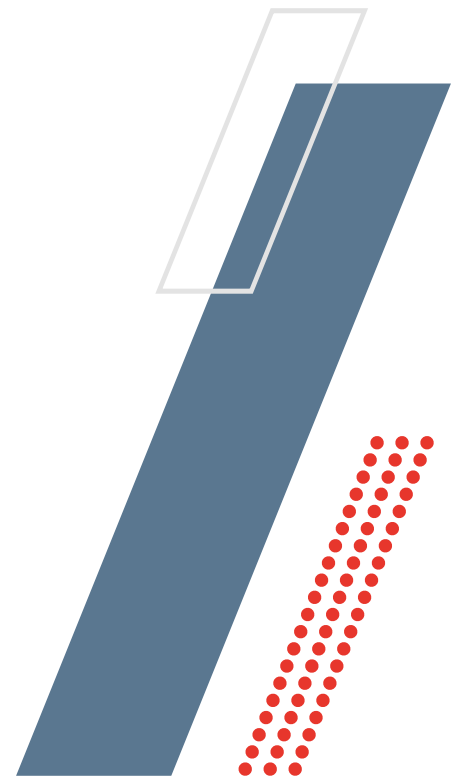
**Announce resolution:** Once the crisis is resolved, announce the resolution publicly and explain the steps taken to address the issue.

**Example:** “We have resolved the issue regarding [crisis]. Here’s what we’ve done to ensure it doesn’t happen again...”

**Thank the community:** Express gratitude to those who provided constructive feedback or helped address the issue. Include stakeholders if necessary.

**Internal review:** Conduct a post-crisis review with the CMT to evaluate the response, identify lessons learned and update the crisis management plan accordingly.

**Rebuild trust:** Plan and implement strategies to rebuild trust, such as launching a positive campaign, engaging with key stakeholders, or offering resolutions/compensation if applicable.





# Additional information

## Further reading

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- [Crisis Communications Network - Drafting a Crisis Communication Plan](#)
- Cartwright, Rod *Reputation, Risk and Resilience: Where Are We Now and What Happens Next? 2024 Edition*
- Coleman, Amanda *Crisis Communication Strategies: How to Prepare in Advance, Respond Effectively and Recover in Full*
- Coleman, Amanda *Everyday Communication Strategies: Manage Common Issues to Prevent a Crisis and Protect Your Brand*
- Coombs, W. Timothy *Ongoing Crisis Communication*
- Griffin, Andrew *Crisis, Issues and Reputation Management*
- Hartley, Kate *How to Communicate in a Crisis*
- Hemus, Jonathan *Crisis Proof*
- Sellnow, Timothy L. and Seeger, Matthew W. *Theorizing Crisis Communication*

## Crisis Communications Network website and social links

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**Website:** [ciprcrisiscommsnetwork.com](http://ciprcrisiscommsnetwork.com)

**LinkedIn:** [linkedin.com/company/cipr-crisis-communications-network](https://linkedin.com/company/cipr-crisis-communications-network)

**X:** [x.com/CIPRCrisisComm](https://x.com/CIPRCrisisComm)

**Email:** [ciprcrisiscom@gmail.com](mailto:ciprcrisiscom@gmail.com)

## CIPR qualifications and training

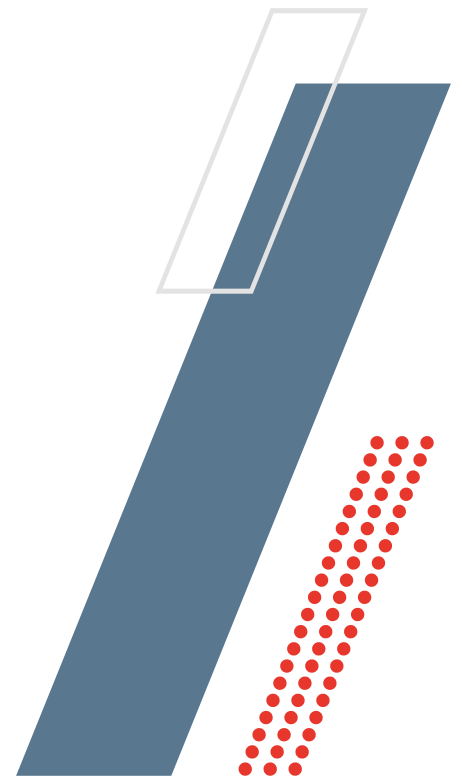
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- [CIPR Crisis Communication Diploma \(Specialist\)](#)
- [Crisis Communication, a one day CIPR course](#)
- [Crisis Communication, on-demand course \(free to CIPR members\)](#)

## Independent companies that provide crisis simulation training

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[Polpeo](#)





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# Acknowledgements

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