Utilizing social networks in times of crisis: Understanding, exploring and analyzing critical incident management at institutions of higher education

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With the rising number of major crises on college campuses today (Security on Campus Inc., 2009), institutions of higher education can benefit from understanding of how social networks may be used in times of emergency. What is currently known about the usage of social networks is not integral to the current practices of crisis management that are built on Drabek’s (1986) phases. Social networks serve as prominent vehicles for disseminating information quickly and in times of disasters, have solved many problems plaguing communications (White, et.al. 2009).

The primary purpose of this dissertation was to understand if the advent of social networking during the last five years has changed the nature of critical incidents at institutions of higher education and if phases introduced by Drabek twenty-five years ago still accurately describe the evolution of modern critical incident management. These three exploratory questions served as the guides in the development and progress of this research study: (1) How has the evolution of a critical incident changed since Drabek first developed his framework, particularly in light of new social networking tools?; (2) To what extent has social networking, in its development over the past five years, affected critical incident management at institutions of higher education?; and (3) To what extent might Drabek’s model be further adapted in consideration of social networks for purposes of critical incident management at institutions of higher education?

An understanding and interpretation of the applicability of Drabek’s phases for critical incident management in light of social networking is needed for it has the potential to present new consideration and guide institutions of higher education toward future best practices. This comparative case study takes an exploratory approach for qualitative inquiry using methods of observation, interviews, document analysis and process tracing to understand if the advent of social networking has changed the nature of critical incidents at institutions of higher education and if phases introduced by Drabek still accurately describe critical incident management.

The data for this exploratory qualitative study consisted of content analysis, observations of social networks for a six-month period and interviews with chief student affairs officers from community colleges. The triangulation of data revealed that the advent of social networks has changed the nature of critical incident management at institutions of higher education and the phases introduced by Drabek may not accurately describe the evolution of modern critical incident management, particularly as new technologies, such as social networking, further complicate the development of critical incidents.