Participatory Journalism and Crisis Communications:
A Swedish Case Study of Swine Flu Coverage

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Abstract

Public relations research has recently explored how the digitalization of the media has affected crisis communications, focusing on such phenomena as corporate websites and blogs. This study first argues that digitalization involving user participation also changes traditional news production and that this affects the frame in which issues and crisis are told and understood. It then empirically explores media users' influence on news frameworks through a case study of how mainstream Swedish online news covered the swine flu outbreak in 2009, finding that such users were an integral part of the media coverage of that crisis, contributing with a variety of voices that primarily criticized the media's paradigms. It concludes by discussing these findings' implications for crisis communications, in particular the impact of crisis communications becoming multidirectional and decentralized through participatory journalism.

Keywords: participatory journalism, crisis communication, swine flu, online news, audience participation, user-generated content

Introduction

The news media have long played an important role in crisis communications by creating frames within which their audiences understand the crises taking place. These frames consequently affect all those involved, including the organizations the crises affect and their stakeholders. The media's omnipresence in modern societies means that mass media outlets have played a crucial role in previous crisis-communication research. For example, Pavlik (2003) argued that journalism probably plays its most imperative role during crises. The media provide a springboard through which affected organizations can communicate with their stakeholders, albeit under journalism's institutionalized constraints.

All social institutions, including organizations, are therefore media institutions, in that the media's presence and logic influence their structure and performance (Altheide & Snow, 1991). Most large organizations have public relations offices, largely for interacting with the media. CEOs receive training in how to interact with media representatives, who expect press conferences for major announcements. Changes in media logic therefore have consequences for institutions, consequences of which they may or may not be aware at the time.

Existing crisis-communication and public-relations research has explored how the traditional news media frame organizations during crises (An & Gover, 2009; Coombs, 2007; Freudenburg, Coleman, Gonzalez, & Helgeland, 1996; Holladay, 2009), whether blogs change public relations (Fearn-Banks, 2007; Kelleher &

Miller, 2006; Kent, 2008; Porter, Sweetser Trammell, Chung, & Euonsong, 2007; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Xifra & Huertas, 2008), and how the Internet can change the way organizations communicate with their stakeholders (Fearn-Banks, 2007; Bucher, 2002; Coombs, 1998; González-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Heath, 1998). However, no study has yet tried to analyze the implications of participatory journalism on crisis communications or to explore it in an empirical setting.

Participatory journalism refers to professional journalists and media users producing news together within a mainstream news platform (Nip, 2006). This involves a scenario in which organizations can potentially face situations involving media users contributing to news frameworks describing and interpreting their actions. This pilot study therefore has the two purposes of examining participatory journalism's potential to affect crisis communications and of exploring the realization of that potential by influencing the online media coverage of a crisis. It does this through a case study of the outbreak of H1N1 influenza (swine flu) during April and May 2009.

This paper first presents a literature review focusing on the roles of the news media and the Internet in crisis communications and how participatory journalism can affect such communications, producing three research questions that guide the study's primary research. It then describes that research's methodology, which is a case study, after which it presents its findings and discusses them. It ends by reaching some conclusions, noting its limitations, and making suggestions for further research.

Literature Review

This literature review consists of two sections. The first presents an assessment of the mass media's role in crisis communications and the Internet's potential to change communications; the second examines participatory journalism and its potential to affect crisis communications.

Crises and Paths of Communication

Crisis-communication research has until recently delineated clearly defined roles for the different participants in mass-mediated crisis communications (Krimsky, 2007). Organizations have had the role of being the sources of information, the media that of being the intermediate transmitters and definers of news, and the audiences that of being the passive and final destination of crisis communications, to which they could react. This tacit paradigm has been of a transmission model. Since media systems are a vital part of crisis management, changes in them are highly likely to have consequences for crisis management.

The Internet has apparently changed the logic of the media landscape radically, requiring similar radical changes in crisis communications and management.

Crisis–communication researchers have found that the Internet has challenged previous modes of communication. The main focus of their research has been on how the Internet allows both organizations and the general public to bypass the traditional media's gatekeeper function and enables them to communicate without the intervention of organized journalism, albeit with uneven quality (Bucher, 2002; Coombs, 1998; González-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Heath, 1998a).

Organizations now consider it important to communicate with interested parties through their websites, and some them, along with their publics, have utilized their organizational websites as effective channels of communication (Greer & Moreland, 2003; Kauffman, 2005; White & Raman, 2000). Some organizations, however, have failed to realize the Internet's full potential (Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Greer & Moreland, 2003; Kirat, 2007; Perry, Taylor, & Doerfel, 2003; Taylor & Kent, 2007; Taylor & Perry, 2005). Another strand of thought within contemporary public-relations research involves how such social media as blogs affect various public-relations practices. Some studies have found blogs to change the operating environment, but others have suggested that their reach is limited (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Kent, 2008; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Xifra & Huertas, 2008).

These findings together suggest that communication during a crisis is likely to be decentralized and multidirectional (Bucher, 2002). Organizations, their stakeholders, and the public are now able to communicate with each other without intervention by the mass media. This situation means that the news media are losing their gatekeeper powers and therefore the power to select what issues reach public awareness and how those issues are framed (Harper, 2003; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Singer, 2005).

While new forms of mediated communication have had an impact, the established mainstream news media have played and continue to play a key role in crisis communications, as they still tend to dominate as sources within the blogosphere (Kenix, 2009; Meraz, 2009; Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun, & Jeong, 2007). They therefore remain important for organizations affected by crises, which can expect them to cover litigious or unusual issues that arise, especially during crises (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Fearn-Banks, 2007). The media's framing of an issue or crisis consequently tends to affect how the public perceives and evaluates the organizations involved (An & Gowen, 2009; Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Coombs, 2007; Driedger, 2007; Entman, 2002; Hallahan, 1999). In addition, many people are likely to prefer journalistic rather than an organizational or blog interpretations of ongoing crises.

The digitalization of the media not only has implications in regard to the mass media's gatekeeper role, but is also a key factor for explaining the growth of participatory journalism, which is flourishing on the Internet. Some crisis-communication research has acknowledged the existence of online news as being different than

regular news and potentially having an impact on crisis-communication management (Kirat, 2007; Lee 2005). However, although Lee briefly noted that such defining characteristics of online news as its immediacy and interactivity seemed important during the SARS crisis, no study has yet investigated participatory journalism's actual occurrences in online news or its potential for interplay between those inside and outside the news media, particularly in regard to crisis communications.

Participatory Journalism and Crisis Communications

Digital media do not follow the same logic as traditional analogue media. Such practices as journalism and public relations that move from one medium to another are consequently likely to change relatively radically to conform with these new media's logic. One such defining feature of online journalism is interactivity, which enables journalists and media users to co-produce the news, together contributing to the content of a mainstream news outlet, which, as noted earlier, is the essence of participatory journalism (Nip, 2006).

Participatory journalism is especially intriguing in the context of crisis communications, in which the production of traditional news also has dimensions of being decentralized and multidirectional. This suggests that people turning to mainstream media that they trust for information may receive content that simultaneously consists of contributions from journalists and non-journalist users who are not necessarily in tune with each other.

Accordingly, user participation in the production of news potentially blurs the distinction between news producers and consumers and implies that journalists and media organizations are losing some control over their own news outlets in a "tactical war for control over the text" (Cover, 2006, p. 141), control which is at the center of the journalistic profession and the mass media's power (Deuze, 2007; Singer, 2003). Although mainstream online news media did once limit their users to such forms of participation as prearranged polls (Kent, 2008), this is no longer the case in many countries, with user participation, although still limited, gradually increasing (Bucy, 2004; Greer & Mensing, 2006; Tremayne, Schmitz Wiess, & Calmon Alves, 2007).

The news media do encourage their users to send them information, images, and pictures of events that the users witness (Pantti & Bakker, 2009). After the 2005 London bombings BBC received 22,000 emails and text messages, 300 photos, and several video sequences of their aftermath (Hermida & Thurman, 2008). Furthermore, many mainstream online news outlets invite users to comment on the published news (Domingo et al., 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Schmitz Weiss & de Macedo Higgins Joyce, 2009). For example, the Swedish mainstream news website *expressen.se* had nearly 3,000 comments per day in the

fall of 2009 (Mattsson, 2009). Mainstream news sites therefore do offer platforms for their users to take part in setting the media framework in which issues and crises are reported and understood.

Domingo et al. (2008) identified five key stages of journalistic production in which users can play a part. These are access-and-observation, which involves submitting news-story tips, ideas, or both, selection-and-filtering, which involves choosing what will be published, processing-and-editing, which involves shaping its content, distribution, which involves sharing with others, and interpretation, which involves commenting on existing news stories. Existing studies of participatory journalism have emphasized that news organizations prevent their users from participating in all news stories, in all stages of news production, or both, restricting their participation to soft issues, accidents, or commenting on already-produced items, thereby allowing journalists to retain their traditional gatekeeper power (Domingo et al., 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Pantti & Bakker, 2009; Singer & Ashman, 2009; Örnebring, 2008).

Consequently, when users participate in several of news production's key stages the organizations involved in a crisis face the situation in which users provide a large mosaic of such types of information as images, feelings, thoughts, facts, and hoaxes about that crisis, information that the media later might convert into news stories. Such interactive options as discussion forums and news commentary potentially enable users to influence the context in which the news is presented. In the distinctive circumstances that surround a crisis it is therefore possible for users to articulate support for the organizations involved, the media coverage, or both, as well as make false statements, attack the organizations involved, question the journalistic description of events, and provide counter descriptions, creating a generally opinionated environment for the issue.

Participatory journalism means that both media users and interested organizations are not restricted to blogs, websites, and such collective sites as YouTube, but through a variety of interactive options can also support or oppose the stories that the organizations and the media provide on media websites, thereby exposing messages to larger audiences. In the context of crisis communications participatory journalism implies that in order to get their messages through, organizations involved in crises may potentially have to deal with thousands of media users and possibly their competitors, who are increasingly able to express their views on those crises in a news context visible to all other users of news websites, as well as with journalists.

Furthermore, whenever issues concerning organizations involved in crises are on the online news agenda, interactivity opens up other possible ways for those organizations to initiate and respond to both the journalistic content and the interactively fuelled discourse surrounding it. The battle to define the news has therefore also changed its position within the news paradigms in which it is fought, lost, and won by journalists, media users, and organizations.

In summary, influencing information flows and acting as an authoritative source of information has traditionally been the basic procedure for managing issues and crises (Kauffman, 2005; Regester & Larkin, 2008). Crisis communications face a serious test as the volatile and anarchic nature of participatory news makes influencing or guiding the flow of information exceedingly difficult (Bucher, 2002). Not only can anyone have a blog, but news media are also becoming less able to control the content of mass communications due to various participatory features and the rise of social media. Participatory journalism is important in regard to how online news, and consequently the organizations involved, monitor crises, and both the news media and the general public need to appreciate what this means for crisis communications. This potential scenario has yet to be empirically investigated in a crisis communications context, however. The rest of this paper will therefore focus on an empirical pilot study of how the potential for user-generated content became realized and influenced online media coverage of the swine flu outbreak in the spring of 2009. I chose the outbreak of swine flu because it was unpredicted, potentially dangerous, and threatened both vital societal functions and organizational performances (Coombs, 2007; Fearn-Banks, 2007; Regester & Larkin, 2008). The news media also used such terms as "The Death Flu" and "A threat to mankind" in their extensive coverage of it (Turister smittade av dödsinfluensan, 2009, April 26, n.p.; Wagner, 2009, April 30, n.p.). This informed the three research questions I developed to address these points.

As it seemed essential to begin by evaluating what opportunities users had to take part and have their say in news production at different sites, the first research question (RQ1) asks what participatory features were present on news sites during the swine flu outbreak. Since previous studies had reported that online news media often provide media users with the roles of commenting on already-produced material, contributing to soft issues, or providing images of accidents, I designed the second research question (RQ2) for investigating the role users had in regard to swine flu coverage, asking in what parts of the journalistic processes and through what functions the media allowed them roles during the swine flu outbreak. Finally, it seemed pertinent to identify within what framework or frameworks users co-created news. I addressed this with the third research question (RQ3), asking what framework or frameworks Swedish media users employed in regard to how they formulated their viewpoints about swine flu.

Method

The existing research addressing methodological issues in regard to news on the Internet has advocated or used the case-study approach (Matheson, 2004; Karlsson & Strömbäck, 2010; Kopper, Kolthoff, & Czepek, 2000). As a high-profile case such as swine flu also suits this method this paper also utilized a case study.

Researching news content on the Internet poses unprecedented challenges, as it constantly and unpredictably changes with no restriction by time or space, with news stories on the Internet having no finite beginnings or endings (Deuze, 2008; Karlsson & Strömbäck, 2010; McMillan, 2000). Furthermore, these news stories evolve over time, with changes in text and elements of multimodality, user participation, and hyperlinks irregularly added or subtracted. Some hyperlinks may be persistent on a front page over several days, while others disappear within hours. No clear line of demarcation therefore exists of where and when one news item ends and another begins. This study accordingly views the entire coverage of the swine flu outbreak as one news story spanning more than 24 days.

Sweden had a high Internet penetration of 83% in 2009 and a long Internet history (Findahl, 2009), which suggests that its media and public had become accustomed to the specifics of Internet use, including participatory journalism. This makes Swedish online news a more interesting case to study than that of countries where the Internet has yet to make the same impact. I chose the news websites of the four national newspapers, *Aftonbladet, Expressen, Dagens Nyheter*, and *Svenska Dagbladet*, for this study because they have been online since the mid-1990s and reach a large proportion of the 9 million Swedes, with 1 to 5 million users weekly (Kiaindex, 2010).

I monitored and downloaded these news sites six times a day at approximately every third hour, starting at 9 a.m. and finishing at midnight daily during swine flu's outbreak phase. I made the first download at 9 p.m. on April 26, 2009, when it had become clear that the news media would provide continuous coverage of the story. The downloading stopped on May 20, 2009, as the reporting had lost its intensity by then, the last day all four news sites simultaneously having covered it being May 10.

As news sites change continuously it is important to store information locally. For this study I downloaded the news sites using a combination of computer software and screen grabs. This process created a database that I was able to analyze afterwards. I then scrutinized all downloads to determine what participatory features each news site offered. I analyzed the user frameworks semi-inductively with the expectation that the users would remark on some of the organizations involved and the swine flu itself, but not to what organizations they would direct these comments nor how they would perceive those organizations.

Findings

User Participation in Journalistic Processes (RQ1 & RQ2)

The first two research questions concern the participatory features that were available and in what parts of the journalistic process the websites allowed users a role during such crisis events as the swine flu outbreak. Table 1 illustrates these dimensions.

Table 1

User Access to Journalistic Processes at Four Swedish News Websites

Journalistic process	*Aftonbladet*	*Expressen*	*Dagens Nyheter (DN)*	*Svenska Dagbladet (SvD)*
Access and Observation	Could contribute to news items	Could contribute to news items	none	Could contribute to news items
Filtering	none	none	none	none
Editing and Processing	Published user contributions	Published user contributions	Published user contributions; reported errors	Published user contributions; reported errors
Distribution	Could send to a friend - Facebook - MySpace	Could send to a friend - Facebook - Bloggy	Could send to a friend - Facebook - Digg - Pusha - Stumble Upon - Del.icio.us	Could send to a friend - Facebook - Digg - Bloggy - Pusha - MySpace - Stumble Upon - Del.icio.us
Interpretation	Comment Bloglinks Email to the author	Comment Bloglinks Poll Email to the author	Comment Bloglinks Email to the author	Comment Bloglinks Email to the author

Users could, as shown, participate in four of the five key journalistic processes, but the exception being filtering the news. Three of the four news websites invited their users to contribute to news items by requesting information and imagery about swine flu and associated topics. The *Svenska Dagbladet* website kept a flyer posted in its swine-flu news items asking for user contributions continuously from noon on April 27 until 09:00 a.m. on May 5. The *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen* websites occasionally displayed a similar flyer,

but the *Dagens Nyheter* website never did. Users contributing to news items is an example of news websites employing them as observers, effectively turning their audiences into sources and reporters.

Although the websites invited their users to take part in the gathering stage, this study found no sign that they explicitly allowed them to affect or control what the sites would present as news, their journalists retaining the exclusive right to the key journalistic process of filtering and selecting what their sites would make publicly available. It can be argued, however, that it is challenging for a single news outlet to ignore any issue that other outlets in the public sphere, whether traditional or social-media, have publicized.

The third key journalistic process involves shaping news items before publishing them, so any sign that Sweden's media users actually or potentially influenced the content of news would mean that they were taking part in this process. This study found that all four news websites displayed instances in which their users played a role in shaping content, with all four websites publishing user contributions. Published user contributions involved information the websites identified as originating with users becoming news. Such information could be either an image or an eyewitness account of an event, such as those that the websites requested in the access-and-observation journalistic process. The websites also presented users' comments or chatlogs as news. The report-an-error variable on the *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet* websites involved a function in their templates that encouraged their users to contact them to help correct mistakes in published news items.

Both these functions illustrated that journalists and users did create news together. Although journalists were clearly in the driver's seat, users also unmistakably had an active role in shaping the news in regard to swine flu as it unfolded on these websites.

Distribution used to mean only the sending of information from producers to consumers, a process that requires a massive infrastructure. Online information, however, is stored in an interconnected network of databases, making distribution a matter of promoting these databases, controlling access to them, and facilitating communication with other databases. This study found that all four of the news websites studied employed two different techniques to help users distribute news about swine flu, enabling them to send articles to friends via emails with links to them or to promote news articles via various social media networks. The *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen* websites linked to two of them, the *Dagens Nyheter* website to five, and the *Svenska Dagbladet* website to seven.

All four of the sites provided three different functions that allowed their users to interpret and comment upon the news they distributed. One is the ability to email to the articles' authors. Although this certainly could influence the shaping of the news and did allow users to send in tips, the email address was a generic function opening up a channel of communication rather than constituting the active seeking of specific user contributions. Another participatory function the sites offered encouraged users to post such

comments as short remarks about news items and the issues they covered in those items' vicinity. Most but not all of the commentary functions required their users to register. The other function, called *bloglinks*, enabled its users to link their blogs to news items and thereby establish links with them posted next to the news items they chose, providing bloggers and traditional news websites with the capacity to exchange audiences with each other. One of the websites also presented its users with polls that invited users to respond to issues according to set options. This evidence clearly shows that these news websites' users were able to become involved in key journalistic processes during the coverage of the swine flu crisis through a variety of participatory features.

Framing the Swine Flu (RQ3)

It is also important to examine what framework or frameworks these news websites provided their users during the swine flu outbreak. As the websites extensively control the three first stages of the journalistic process, and distribution does not concern frameworks intrinsically, this part of this study addresses the fifth key journalistic process of interpretation. The user blogs and the commentary function allowed users to express themselves without subjecting their contributions to the need to be selected for publishing, depending on how well they fit into the journalistic framework. Online news media generally appreciate it when their users comment on news items, but like to keep them out of traditional news production (Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Pantti & Bakker, 2009; Singer & Ashman, 2009). This indicates that online news-media users' greatest opportunities to provide an independent framework in regard to the swine flu story was in commenting on it and interpreting it.

Although this study's focus is not media framing, it is important as a reference point for the media users' framing of the issue. For approximately a week with few exceptions the news media framed the swine flu outbreak as a pandemic, reporting that the virus was resistant to vaccines, spreading fast, and out of control, and describing the pharmaceutical corporations and responsible authorities as powerless and caught unprepared. The online media also framed swine flu as highly contagious, calling airplanes that had carried its suspected victims "infectious planes" [translated from Swedish] (Svenska ombord på smittplanet, 2009, May 2, n.p.; 112 flög med smittplanet, 2009, May 2, n.p.). The *Aftonbladet* website encouraged people who had traveled in a "flu plane" [translated from Swedish] to contribute information to its story about it (Svenska med på influensaplanet, 2009, May 2, n.p.). The *Expressen* website referred to the illness as the "death flu" [translated from Swedish] (Turister smittade av dödsinfluensan, 2009, April 26, n.p.), and quoted the head of the World Health Organization as saying that "Mankind is threatened in the case of a pandemic" [translated from Swedish] (Wagner, 2009, April 30, n.p.).

After about a week the coverage decreased and the tone changed. On May 4 the *Dagens Nyheter* website reported that the situation had apparently eased (Inga nya dödsfall i influensan, 2009, May 4, n.p.), and the *Svenska Dagladet* website announced that "The epidemic is tamed" [translated from Swedish] (Mexiko har 'tyglat epidemin', 2009, May 4, n.p). The next day the *Svenska Dagladet* website reported further that Mexico, the original site of the outbreak, had returned to normal (Mexiko återgår till det normala, 2009, May 5, n.p.). The initial media framework was therefore one of considerable alarm, but the websites later toned this down considerably.

The different participatory features described earlier allowed the website's users to support or criticize their frameworks. It is clearly impossible to do justice to all the nuances of the thousands of comments and bloglinks posted during this study's time span, but they did generally fall into three vaguely coherent frameworks.

The first and definitely the strongest user framework was one of suspicion of media exaggeration, characterized by accusations that the news media were hyperbolizing swine flu and preying on peoples' fears in order to boost circulation. One user called on the news media to "stop the propaganda of fear" [translated from Swedish] (Comment, Aftonbladet.se, 2009, April 27, n.p.), and others questioned their editorial judgment. Some of the media users' comments within this framework were humorous and satirical, such as, "Will there be a press conference the next time someone in Norway catches a cold?" [translated from Swedish] (Comment, Expressen.se, 2009, May 9, n.p.). Another aspect of this framework involved users trying to put swine flu and its media coverage into perspective by asking how many people commit suicide or die of starvation or the ordinary flu every year and why the media are silent about these.

I identified the second framework as preparation for swine flu's arrival. This involved people being concerned about the virus and wanting information about how serious it would be, how to avoid it, and how long it would be before it reached Sweden. Sometimes users engaged in conversations about whether it was really dangerous and exchanged advice in regard to precautionary measures. Such discussions implicitly supported the journalistic framework, as they reinforced the media's initial scenario. This framework also included a group of users who fueled the initial media panic in their comments and blogs by echoing its framework that swine flu was coming rapidly and we could do nothing about it.

The third and smallest framework centered on political responsibility. This was characterized by criticism of the authorities for doing too little too late due to incompetence, having an explicit political agenda, or both. Those in this framework also supported the journalistic framework and found support in parts of it. Several news stories portrayed the responsible authorities as unprepared and powerless and others questioned why the parliamentary majority had not decided to support the building of influenza vaccine factories in Sweden.

The blogs that users linked to news stories were both individual and collective. Most of the bloglinks that this study observed were to individual blogs, in which users posted their personal thoughts and feelings about the issue. Collective blogs involved groups of users with a shared interest or viewpoint. The political-responsibility framework in particular involved some collective blogs on the political left that consistently criticized the government, which the political right controlled. The users' ability to comment on news stories therefore provided a platform for various more-or-less organized groups to criticize media coverage, public policy, and other organizations. Finally, it should be noted that, unlike the other two sites, the *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen* websites radically limited user access to the comment and bloglink functions after May 3. In summary, this paper finds it most interesting that users questioned the online media's framing of the swine flu story even on their own sites, constantly criticizing and mocking them for overstating its dangers.

Discussion, Conclusion, Limitations, and Suggested Further Research

Previous public-relations and crisis-communication research has emphasized that how the news media frame issues or crises is important for how people perceive those organizations involved in them (An & Gower, 2009; Coombs, 2007; Hallahan, 1999). Bucher (2002) also stressed that crisis communications become multidirectional and decentralized when they take place online. The mass media no longer control access to the public arena, as other forms of communication are available for organizations and the public to utilize for communicating with each other (Coombs, 1998; Fearn-Banks, 2007; González-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Porter et al., 2007).

The mass media, however, are still important due to both their capacity to frame issues and crises and to influence the blogosphere's agenda (Kenix, 2009; Meraz, 2009; Reese et al., 2007). Although the mass media remain important, this study found that in the case of Swedish online news' swine flu coverage, and with a likelihood of wider validity, mainstream news outlets no longer exclusively controlled the key journalistic processes or the framing of issues, even on their own home turf.

Participatory journalism has clearly resulted in the news media losing control to some extent over what becomes published as news and the contexts in which the news is presented by permitting users to comment on it and to contribute to the reporting of accidents and soft issues (Domingo et al., 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Pantti & Bakker, 2009; Singer & Ashman, 2009; Örnebring, 2008). This study found that in the context of online news media the users' involvement has gone beyond such activities to becoming an integral part of most of the key journalistic processes, even in the context of a major crisis story like the swine flu outbreak. The Swedish online news media invited their users to provide tips, videos, images, information, and commentary about the crisis story's various dimensions and transformed user

contributions into elements of some news stories or into entire stories. Their websites appealed to users to fact-check, proofread, and correct their news stories as they unfolded, requested that they distribute news items via email and social media despite such distribution being uneven and hard to predict, and also offered them platforms within their journalistic frameworks from which they could voice a wide variety of opinions about anything and anyone involved in the crisis. The websites' users therefore played a part in the reporting of swine flu from the start.

The traditional procedures for crisis communication were to influence what information the public receives and to behave as an authoritative source of that information (Kauffman, 2005; Regester & Larkin, 2008). The Internet compromises this approach intrinsically, and this study found that it does so particularly by encouraging participatory journalism, which enables its users to have a considerable impact on the interpretation and understanding of crises, both through their own blogs and, more importantly, by linking their blogs to the established media's websites, by contributing to them directly, or both.

The Swedish online media's coverage of the swine flu story involved several frameworks, and although the journalistic framework may have remained the key one for those involved to try to influence, user frameworks did create challenges to its dominance. Users who visit news websites face major difficulties in differentiating and evaluating the various frameworks competing to influence them. This study found the initial media framing to be exaggerated, with later media coverage contradicting it, but a worldwide outbreak of swine flu did take place. The speed with which it spread, however, was a matter of months rather than the days that the initial media reports suggested. To some extent the later media framework and the initial user framework therefore corresponded with each other. Users may have been wise to heed some of the initial comments from other users, but alternative user frameworks also existed. What information to believe and why is always problematic.

Participatory journalism complicates online crisis communications but also offers new means of influence for different actors who have the time, knowledge, and other resources to exert it. Participatory journalism also enables organizations involved in crises to contribute to the key journalistic processes on mainstream news websites, which actively provide opportunities for such users as citizens, activists, corporations, and other organizations to affect the raw informational material and the shaping of the news. It also enables them to act swiftly to correct errors and reframe issues. Affected organizations can now move their crisis communications beyond traditional media patterns and their own corporate media outlets and engage in framing battles within the mixture of traditional and social media that is participatory journalism.

This study contributes to crisis-communication research by illustrating both theoretically and empirically that actors outside the media participated in several key journalistic processes and consequently influenced the media's coverage and framing of the swine flu story. These findings suggest that the obstacles and

possibilities associated with participatory journalism can have a tangible impact on crisis communications, and that the authorities, citizens, and organizations involved in the handling of such crises as the swine flu outbreak need to be conscious of them.

This is a pilot study of one case and therefore presents limited possibilities for generalization. Since longitudinal research has indicated that news media users are gradually taking a larger role in the co-creation of news, however, it seems sensible to suggest that not only will online news users be overwhelmingly likely to help cover future crises, but also that their role will expand even further (Bucy, 2004; Greer & Mensing, 2006; Tremayne et al., 2007).

This study found that media users challenged both the actions and the inaction of the Swedish media and government. In other circumstances they would be likely to challenge or support other organizations. Considering the importance of the mass media's framing of public perceptions of crisis-affected organizations, participatory journalism raises imperative questions in regard to how organizations should manage their media relations. These include selecting the appropriate way to respond if media users ridicule news reports about them, whether it is more important to address the media paradigm or the user paradigm when they contradict each other on a pertinent issue, and how media users and other stakeholders perceive organizations that utilize participatory features to address issues affecting them.

Future research needs to address these and other issues that relate to the impact of media users taking part in the creation of news frameworks. Such issues include whether user participation influences other users' perceptions of issues, the credibility of the journalistic framework, and the reputation of the organizations involved, the possibilities of influencing subsequent commentary on news stories and their and interpretation by being the first to establish a user framework, and how organizations view and utilize participatory journalism as a tool for crisis communication. Addressing these and other issues can enhance our understanding of how participatory journalism affects public relations in general and crisis communications in particular.

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