
Francisco Javier Cristófol

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0967-3514>

fjcrisofol@esic.edu

ESIC, Business & Marketing School

Jordi de San Eugenio-Vela

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3390-8819>

Jordi.saneugenio@uvic.cat

Universitat de Vic-Universitat

Central de Catalunya

Francisco Javier Paniagua-Rojano

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7376-4536>

fjpaniagua@uma.es

Universidad de Málaga

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Active listening in the management of crisis communication: Case study of the 2017 terrorist attack in Barcelona

Abstract

This article analyses the use of social networks as a public relations strategy within the framework of a crisis communication strategy deployed following a terrorist attack. More specifically, the Twitter account of the Police of Catalonia (@mossos) is analysed in view of the attacks that took place in Barcelona and Cambrils in August 2017. Methodologically, content analysis of the Catalan police's Twitter account is performed through the collection and subsequent analysis of messages issued in the 10-day period following the first attack. Additionally, and as a result of this research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight experts in crisis communication, with the aim of determining, within the framework of this case study, the functions and uses of social networks in the context of crises caused by terrorist attacks. The results show how, in a context of crisis communication, the messages posted by the Mossos d'Esquadra's Twitter account transcend mere service information to become an asset of public relations, engagement and constant interaction and mutual collaboration and dialogue between the Catalan police and the population that it administers. As a whole, this has an impact on the improvement of the image and reputation of the Catalan police among its fellow citizens.

Keywords

Crisis communication, public relations, Twitter, terrorism, Catalan police, Barcelona.

1. Introduction

Accurate communication by public authorities in crisis situations is a credible and effective source of information for citizens, even more so in the digital reality of Western society (Thelwall & Stuart, 2007; Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). The immediate delivering of messages through social media is a challenge to which public institutions and police and military agencies must adapt and which they must add as their own (Jin & Hong, 2010).

Following the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils (Catalonia) in the month of August, the Mossos d'Esquadra acted immediately to manage the unprecedented crisis. For a week, the official Twitter account of the police force of Catalonia (@mossos) became an informative reference that posted live messages with updates on the status of the investigation, notices to

the public and live broadcasts of press conferences. This communication action, caused by an exceptional situation, was an exercise in public relations, as shown later in the results section.

The communication management of this crisis and how Catalan Police dialogue with their stakeholders, examined via the analysis of posted content and expert interviews, turns out to be an example to be taken into account in the formation of work teams handling communication management following a terrorist attack.

2. Literature review

The concept of crisis is very broad and is accepted and used by academia and the professional field in a similar way. A crisis is a system's rupture or collapse that creates a shared stress (Perry, 2007). Therefore, communication with different elements and actors involved in crisis phenomena is a fundamental factor in crisis management. That is, according to Coombs (2015), if communication during a crisis is inefficient, any other efforts to manage it will also be inefficient.

Risk communication and communication in crisis situations have been studied by numerous researchers and from different points of view. Many authors have defined the concept of crisis, mainly in the business world (Villafañe, 1999; Marín Calahorro, 2008).

Thus, for example, Dolphin (1999, p. 120) defines crisis as "an unpredictable event of a certain entity, which carries with it potential negative consequences for the organization." For Xifra (2009) "a crisis is a phenomenon that can have an immediate and severe impact on the reputation of an organization or its ability to achieve its goals. Some crises are the result of incidents that, although foreseeable, usually happen without much warning."

Albrecht (1996) defines crises as "specific events that can break the balance of an organization, depending on the size of the company, the number of employees it has, the product and its services."

In contexts of crisis, communication is an essential element in the construction of social reality (Hearit & Courtright, 2004, p. 205). Organizations very often face communications crises. Therefore, "strategic crisis communication is conceptualized as the management of communication to proactively detect or prevent crises, to prepare for crises, to cope with ongoing crisis situations, and to deal with post-crisis concerns as well as to evaluate organizational communication in these contexts" (Schwarz, 2016, p. 31).

Schwarz (2016) describes three perspectives in the study of strategic communication in situations of institutional crisis: the institutional perspective, which studies the most relevant structural and cultural context variables at the organizational and social level, which influence the development, implementation and effectiveness of the practice, strategies and effectiveness of communication; the technical-instrumental perspective, which analyses the characteristics of tactics and effective instrumental and technological measures for crisis communication and the extent to which they are disseminated among professionals; and the symbolic-relational perspective, which reflects the characteristics and effects of the content and the method of communication in crisis situations as well as the social relationships among those affected.

In today's crises, digital social media represent a social change in crisis communication. Due to this change, the number of messages and participants in conversations about a crisis has multiplied (Thelwall & Stuart, 2007). In the last decade, most published studies have focused on the use and functions of social media in the management of crisis communication and their importance in creating community to identify risk situations and to resolve them (Landau, 2011; Goolsby, 2010; Graham, Avery & Park, 2015; Gruber, Smerek, Thomas-Hunt & James, 2015; Jin, Liu & Austin, 2011; Lin, Spencer, Sellnow & Lachlan, 2016; Liu & Fraustino, 2014; Schwarz, 2012; Utz, Schultz & Glocka, 2013; Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2013, 2014; Wendling, Radisch & Jacobzone, 2013; Zhu, Anagondahalli & Zhang, 2017). Some of these

works delve into the study of the emotions of the public during crisis situations or on social networks as elements of transparency and active listening of the public.

Social media are applications such as blogs, social networks, platforms for sharing multimedia or wikis (Fuchs, 2017). O'Reilly (2005) cites the main characteristics of the 2.0 philosophy linked to social media. These are radical decentralization, radical trust, participation instead of publication, users as contributors, enriching user experience, the 'long tail', the web as a platform, the control of data individually, interrelated data, collective intelligence, improvement of the software by users, and indeterminate consumer behaviour.

Coombs (2015) states that 'just because you communicate during a crisis does not mean you necessarily make the situation better'. In some cases, cited by the author, the situation even got worse. Thus, Coombs (2015) insists that crisis communication must be strategic; efforts should be designed to improve the situation of stakeholders and the organization in crisis.

Coombs (2010) states that there are two strategies in the field of crisis communication: first, managing information, which involves the work of compiling and disseminating information related to the crisis; and second, managing meaning, which consists in making efforts to influence how people perceive the crisis.

2.1. Dialogical theory of Public Relations

Linked with crisis management, the dialogical public relations theory is also important in this research. Taylor and Kent (2014) affirm that engagement is a part of a dialogue which explains the crucial role of that theory also in crisis management. Following McAllister-Spooner (2009): "Kent and Taylor extended dialogic theory as an honest and ethical means to guide practitioners and scholars in the creation and maintenance of effective organization-public relationships."

Kent and Taylor (2002) confirm that "as public relations theory and research move toward a two-way relational communication model, many scholars and practitioners are increasingly using the terms 'dialogic' and 'dialogue' to describe ethical and practical approaches to public relations." Smith *et al.* (2018) suggest the idea of considering agenda-setting and resiliency part of the crisis communication research. At this point, is also definitive to assume the dialogic orientation in public relations.

2.2. Objectives

This research is intended:

- To know how the Catalan Security Corps try to engage with publics in a terrorist emergency.
- To find the value of Twitter in relation to the different publics and how the Catalan Police used it in emergency situations.
- To measure how Mossos d'Esquadra use social media channels to have contact with Media and society in order to ask for information.

3. Methodology

3.1. Content analysis

After the terrorist attacks of August 17, 2017, in Catalonia (Barcelona and Cambrils), the Twitter account of the Catalan police took the initiative in communicating and providing continuous updates about the attacks. The tweets posted by the @mossos account between August 17 and August 27, a day after the large demonstration against terrorism in Barcelona, were analysed.

Wimmer and Dominick (1996, p. 170) state that content analysis is any systematic procedure designed to examine the content of archived information and that it is a research technique that can yield valid and stable inferences based on data within its context. The definition offered by Kerlinger is the most standardized according to Wimmer and Dominick

(1996, p. 172): “Content analysis is a method of studying and analyzing communications in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner to measure variables.” The content analysis of the tweets has been done manually by the researchers, so no analysis automation tool has been used. To systematize the analysis of the Twitter posts of the @mossos account, the following categorization was developed:

- Category: **Date**. Date the tweet was posted: between August 17th and 27th, 2017.
- Category: **Language**. Subcategories: Language in which the tweet was posted: Catalan, Spanish, English and French.
- Category: **Content**: type of communication. Subcategories:
 - o **Advice**: notices from the @mossos account regarding tips for citizens or victims.
 - o **Info**: general information on the investigations and devices.
 - o **Specific for media**: information addressed to the media, such as press conferences, calls or press statements from members of the government and the police.
- Category: **Qualifier**: sentiment transmitted in the message. Subcategories:
 - o Concern: concern or alert around the attacks.
 - o Relief: messages of calm or reassurance around the attacks.
 - o Gratitude: expressions of gratitude for the collaboration of citizens.
 - o Request for help: call for collaboration to gather more information, for example.
 - o Information to victims: tweets aimed at gathering information about victims and proposals to help them.
 - o Notices for crowds: during those dates, at least two mass demonstrations were held in Barcelona, in addition to a football league match in Barcelona and another in Girona. These tweets seek to encourage the crowd to behave and stay calm.
 - o Public service information: posts providing updates on the status of investigations and the development of police actions.
 - o Solidarity: messages of solidarity from the @mossos account.
- Category: **Attachments**. Subcategories:
 - o Photo: tweets with photograph (one or more) attached.
 - o Live video: live video tweets through Periscope.
 - o Attached video: tweets with attached video.
 - o Retweet: tweets from third-party accounts that have been retweeted by @mossos.

3.2. Focused interviews

This second methodology was chosen as a qualitative complement to the quantitative information collected in the content analysis. It is a combination of two methodologies that, through the transaction of data, generates a unique research circuit from which to achieve relevant results.

The interview is a verbal interaction involving questions and answers that are oriented towards a fixed topic and with specific objectives (Oxman, 1998). Focused interviews are characterized by an exposure of the interviewees to a specific social situation (Merton & Kendall, in Flick, 2014). The interview must provoke in the interviewee reactions related to their cognitive and emotional resources. Patton (2002) states that the script can be followed in an open manner and allows freedom of interaction between interviewer and interviewee.

The sample is made up of experts and academics from the area of crisis communication. The panel consisted of eight people:

- Timothy Coombs, PhD from Purdue University in public affairs and issues management, professor in the Department of Communication at Texas A&M University.
 - o Questionnaire received in English by e-mail on Dec. 18th, 2017.
- Andreas Schwarz, Technische Universität Ilmenau, Department of Public Relations and Communication of Technology.
 - o Questionnaire received in English by e-mail on Dec. 14th, 2017
- José Luis Piñuel, doctor in psychology and philosophy, professor of journalism at the Complutense University of Madrid; lines of research: epistemology of communication, methods and techniques of communication research and crisis communication.
 - o Questionnaire received in Spanish by e-mail on Dec. 19th, 2017
- Elisa Marco Crespo, University CEU Cardenal Herrera, Valencia, expert in communication and media.
 - o Questionnaire received in Spanish by e-mail on Dec. 18th, 2017
- Carlos Horacio Lozano, professor at Rey Juan Carlos University, expert in crisis communication.
 - o Questionnaire received in Spanish by e-mail on Dec. 20th, 2017
- Rocío Pérez de Sevilla, consultant in crisis communication.
 - o Questionnaire received in Spanish by e-mail on Jan. 8th, 2018
- Alberto Mariñas, consultant in crisis communication.
 - o Questionnaire received in Spanish by e-mail on Dec. 19th, 2017
- Maria Jesús Gallego, former communication director of the Ministry of the Interior and consultant in crisis communication.
 - o Questionnaire received in Spanish by e-mail on Jan. 11th, 2018

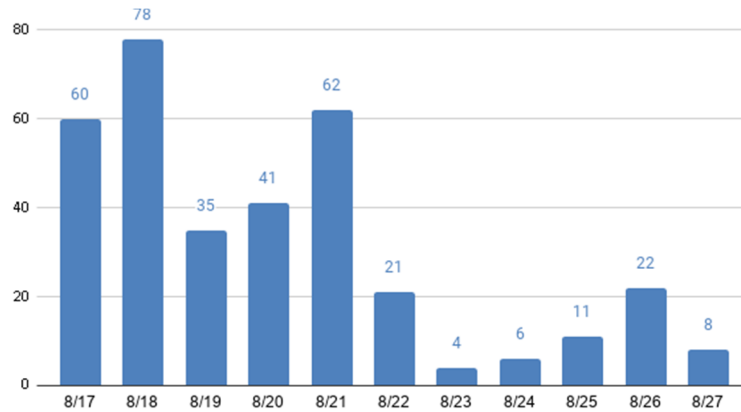
The script of the interviews included five questions related to crisis communication, crisis communication in social media and crisis communication related to terrorist attacks. These were open questions allowing a maximum amount of information to be obtained from the interview for the purposes of this study (Patton, 2002). The questions were as follows:

1. From your point of view, explain briefly what you believe are the fundamental aspects in the management of crisis communication.
2. How do you define information management in crisis communication? And meaning management?
3. What role do social media assume in the communication management of a crisis?
4. What key aspects should be taken into account in the management of crisis communication following terrorist attacks?
5. How do you think that the engagement (commitment) of users in social media can be achieved in a crisis situation caused by terrorist attacks?

4. Results

Between August 17th and 27th, 348 tweets were posted by @mossos with the following distribution:

Graph 1: Tweets by date.



Source: Own elaboration.

The largest number of tweets was posted on August 17th and 18th, the days on which the attacks took place. In addition, August 21 corresponds to the day when the only escaped terrorist was brought down by the Mossos d'Esquadra. On August 26th, a large demonstration against terrorism was held, which is why, after three days when a low number of tweets were posted, the number of messages increased again. On August 27th, @mossos posted the last tweet related to the attack¹.

The graph shows the number of tweets published by @mossos per day. The day after the attack was the one with more tweets posted, 78. During the first five days, they made the biggest communicative effort.

4.1. Interviewees point of view about dates

For the experts interviewed in the context of this research, social media are a crucial tool in the management of crisis communication to find the keys to the crisis and collect feedback based on users' reactions. In some cases, the experts note that social media is the place where certain crises are caused.

The interviewees state in their contributions the need to provide a quick and univocal response to the public to communicate the measures adopted. The chosen channel, Twitter, implies a real immediacy and a broad message scope in terms of ease of content diffusion for a user. In any case, as the interviewees affirm, crisis management requires prior, planned and preventive work.

Coombs says that those responsible for crisis management "must understand how their stakeholders are defining the type of crisis and then decide what is the best way to respond to the situation." Taking into account its immediacy in terms of listening and responding, the social network Twitter is presented as an option that is combined with the need of those responsible for crisis communication.

In this same sense, Mariñas stresses the importance of information transparency and the relevance of sources. In this case, it is a point of direct contact between Mossos and citizens and other stakeholders.

¹ <https://twitter.com/mossos/status/90177558840909824>

Schwarz indicates that it is essential that the professional in charge of crisis communication be able to feel and express empathy with stakeholders. He or she must also have “the ability to make the rest of the organization do the same.”

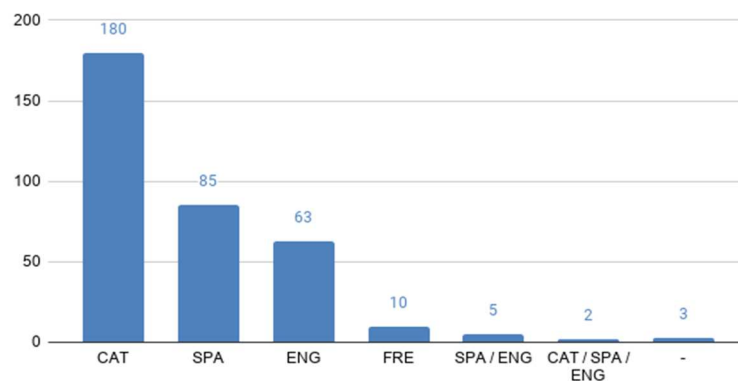
4.2. Interviewees opinion about the relevance of social media

Regarding the importance of social media, Schwarz says that they “can prevent, mitigate, worsen or even help create a crisis,” so the use of Twitter and the number of tweets posted by @mossos allows us to observe the need for communication through direct channels with stakeholders. In that sense, Marco affirms that “social networks have assumed part of the role that conventional media had before.” That is the reason why Mariñas affirms that “today the management of communication in crisis situations cannot be effective if it does not place social media in a priority position.”

4.3. Communications language

In terms of the language in which the tweets were posted by Catalan Police Force, four were identified in the tweets studied: Catalan, Spanish, English and French. Some tweets were published mixing two or three different languages.

Graph 2: Tweets by language.



Source: Own elaboration.

Habitually, the @mossos account posts in Catalan. Following the attacks, it began to use other languages to get closer to the public that came to this source as the most accessible, solvent and reliable. The second language used was Spanish, a co-official language in Catalonia and spoken throughout Spain. The third language was English, an international language and that most used globally on the network. French appears in the second half of the ten days studied, likely motivated by the proximity of Catalonia to France and by certain incidents detected in Belgium. These four languages are used to make it easier for the public to receive information on a global issue. On August 18th, @mossos published a three languages tweet².

4.4. Interviewees point of view about languages used

In an attack in a tourist zone, the victims are of different nationalities. This coincides with Coombs’ point of view: “Crisis managers must focus on the needs of victims, which means concentrating on adjusting and instructing information,” so that transmissions in different languages is something that brings the message closer to the victims.

Gallego mentions “coordinating the information that is issued to avoid duplications and contradictions.” By broadcasting from a single official channel directly in several languages,

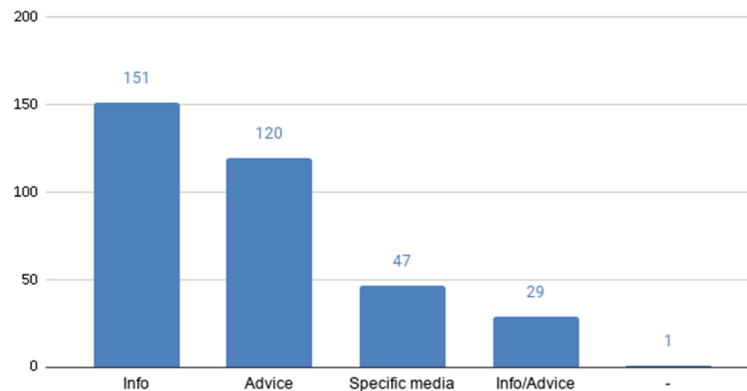
² <https://twitter.com/mossos/status/898375714310959105>

users have access to the information without modifications by an external translator. In all cases, @mossos manages the message.

In this way, by transmitting in different languages, the issuer has control over the management of information but also the management of meaning. For Pérez de Sevilla “the management of perceptions is very common nowadays”, so posting in English, French, Spanish and Catalan allows us to reach a greater number of users directly.

4.5. Content published

Graph 3: Tweets by content.



Source: Own elaboration.

Based on the categories studied, the tweets that issued general information about the performance of the investigations and the start-up or maintenance of the police devices and those that issued warnings and advice to citizens and victims have a similar distribution. Of the 348 tweets studied, 47 focused on information specifically directed to the media: calls for press conferences, live broadcasts via Periscope or transcriptions of headlines and statements by the spokespersons of the police and the Catalan government. The first tweet with info related to attack was posted on August 17th³.

4.6. Interviewees point view about content published

The management of information is understood by experts as the flow of information collected and shared by the organization with regard to the crisis. The management of meaning is understood as the elements that help shape the public's perception of the organization and the crisis. In this sense, the interviewees concur in pointing out the importance of communicating what happened, where and the number of people affected. The experts understand information management as the administration of information and sources while meaning management is understood as monitoring and follow-up of the interpretation of the discourse.

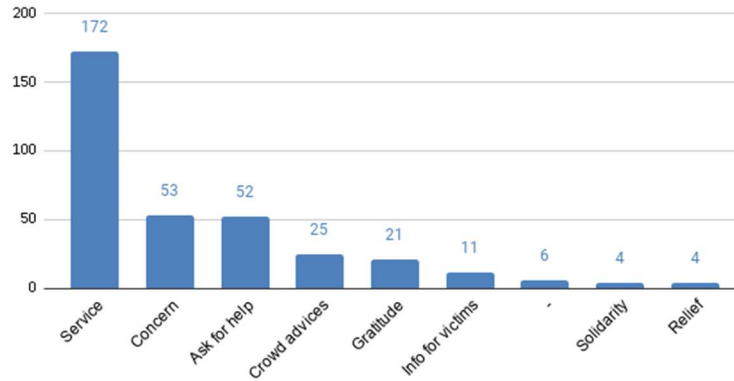
As noted by Coombs, Schwarz, Pérez de Sevilla and Gallego, service information and advice for victims and relatives must be a priority. In the observed case, according to the data, the Twitter profile of the Catalan police acted accordingly. Coombs expands, stating that social media “are a fundamental source to distribute messages during the crisis and learn how people react to the crisis and communication efforts around it.” Schwarz argues that social media ‘offer potential to observe and analyse crisis stakeholders and to address them’.

³ <https://twitter.com/mossos/status/898200352243290113>

4.7. Messages by qualifier

Tweets posted classified according to the type of message issued:

Graph 4: Tweets by qualifier.



Source: Own elaboration.

Most of the posted tweets refer to service information, so that the @mossos account served in the days of the attacks and following as an important source of first-hand information for citizens and the media. In this sense, @mossos imposed, through good management, a transparent and continuous discourse that became a reliable reference for the public.

4.8. Interviewees responses about digital public relations strategy

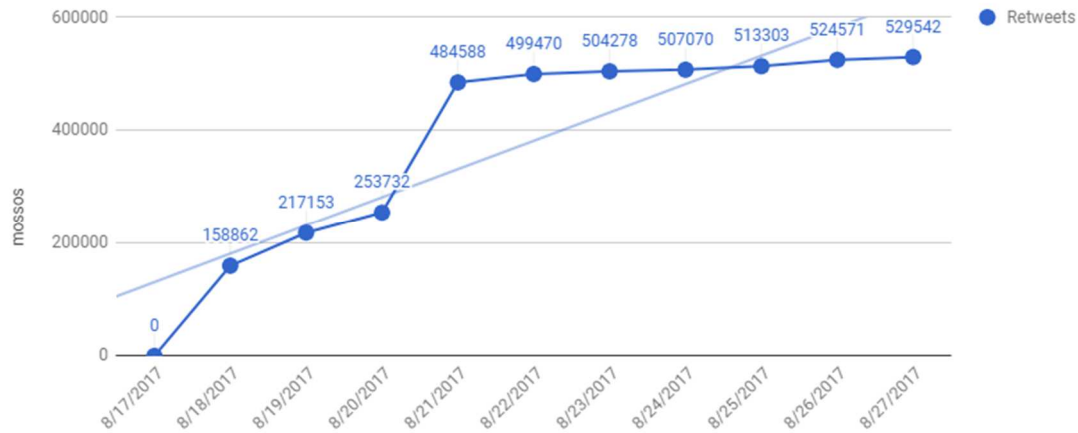
Preventive action is crucial. That is, usual activity should call for trust and transparency. It is necessary to explain how work is planned by public authorities so that the public has a greater proximity to the issuers. Public behaviours, as Piñuel notes, are based on emotions rather than on rationality, and this can make fear, confidence or uncertainty prevail, for example.

Mariñas contributes in this sense that “the terrorist attacks naturally produce the users’ engagement in social networks (most of them because of empathy with the victims and rejection of the criminals and a minority in favour of the terrorists and their motivations).” According to Gallego, the result of this graph is understood as: “Official accounts must be used to transmit truthful and interesting information.” As for Coombs, he also assumes that “crisis managers must focus on the needs of the victims, which means concentrating on adjusting (to protect people physically) and instructing information (help people cope psychologically).”

4.9. Retweets

Number of retweets by the account:

Graph 5: Retweets from @mossos Twitter account.



Source: Own elaboration.

The data in the graph above includes the cumulative number of retweets by other users of the messages issued by @mossos. Between August 20th and 21st, the number of retweets almost doubled. In just 11 days, the account gets more than half a million retweets. The number of retweets reflects the public's acceptance of the messages sent from the @mossos account.

4.10. Interviewees responses about digital communication strategy

Twitter use from Catalan Police align with the answers of some of the experts, such as Mariñas: “Communication from administrations and institutions and companies can achieve more than engagement, credibility if they are fast and well formulated;” Pérez de Sevilla: “Experience has taught us that in these situations commitment arises spontaneously because of the almost instinctive need we all have to try to collaborate, so the important thing is not so much to get that engagement but to direct it and coordinate it so that it can be useful and contribute to the common cause of supporting those affected, reduce uncertainties and restore calm (facilitating information channels, viralizing systems such as the ‘I’m OK’ of Facebook, etc.);” and finally Schwarz: “With a good risk communication strategy and the continuous dialogue with stakeholders on specific and relevant platforms.”

5. Discussion

The immediacy and credibility generated by real-time crisis communication has been studied by different authors (Coombs, 2015; Xifra, 2009). In the case study above, this is confirmed, for example, by the tweets of the Mossos d’Esquadra account on August 21st, which coincides with the capture of Younes Abouyaaqoub, identified by the Catalan police as one of the perpetrators of the attack. The tweets issued increased from 41 to 61 and then declined to 21, 4 and 6 tweets in the following days. In this case, the Twitter account became an informative reference in real time, both for citizens and for the mass media, producing, in this case, a media relations effect (Reber & Kim, 2006; Waters, Tindall & Morton, 2010).

At this point, it is worth highlighting the content of the Twitter messages of the Catalan police. While the most representative correspond to warnings and messages of alert, prevention and information to the public (300 messages), the 47 messages dedicated exclusively to the mass media (calls, press releases and press conferences) stand out, so that the Twitter account (@mossos) is transformed into a virtual press room in real time, changing the traditional relationships and rules established between organizations and the mass media

for the supply of information, as Waters, Tindall and Morton (2010) note. Here, we can speak of ‘management of the perception and the message’, as crisis communication specialist Timothy Coombs notes in the interview conducted in the context of this investigation. This management of the relationship with the media of the Catalan police via Twitter alleviated the work of the press department of the General Directorate of Civil Protection of the Generalitat de Catalunya.

As Roshan *et al.* (2016) confirms, “many organisations did not respond to stakeholder crisis messages during crises, thus not benefitting from the full potential value of social media for supporting organisational crisis communication.” On this case, Catalan Police made profitable use of social media, looking for dialogue, and sending specific messages depending on the stakeholders: they have sent messages just for media, just for the population or just for the victims. So, the use of social media from Mossos d’Esquadra in the context of a crisis is a good example of how to use Twitter in a terrorist emergency.

Following Kent & Taylor (2016), “The public relations scholarship, after extensive research, has concluded that social media (defined usually as Twitter and Facebook) are not dialogic. This is not surprising since the infrastructure of the current social media sites does not facilitate relationship building.” In this specific case, which the relationship is influenced by a crisis situation, social media networks are part of a general dialogue, as Schwartz confirm in the interview. Also Pérez de Sevilla talk about the trying of collaboration from the stakeholders on social media.

Finally, it is also important to note the willingness to reach all audiences through the adoption, from the first day, of different languages with which to communicate with everyone, in addition to the language of origin, in this case Catalan. From the beginning, the tweets were issued in Spanish and English and, then, in French on the fourth day after the first attack. This reaffirms the will to provide universal service information and to seek citizen collaboration and interaction (citizen–police) following the terrorist crisis that took place in Barcelona and Cambrils last August 2017.

6. Conclusions

During the attacks that occurred in Catalonia in 2017, the account @mossos of the Police of Catalonia became, according to the analysed data, the main source of information due to its immediacy and proximity to the public. It worked as a basic public relations tool for the Catalan police force. In the wake of the attacks, according to this research, @mossos made a recognized effort in terms of the nature of the messages issued, the four languages used and the number of messages including service information, which resulted, globally, in an especially useful strategy to achieve engagement with the public. Similarly, citizens were involved in communication, a clear example being the results of tweets released as notices to the public and requests for direct help to advance the investigation.

The management of communication via Twitter by @mossos was in line with making users active players in the crisis. The usual role of message recipients changed during the 10 days in which the content was analysed. In this way, the followers of the Twitter account of the police force of Catalonia played an active part in communication according to the messages analysed. Requests for help and information, advice and calls to action (via telephone, e-mail or social networks) were the main parts of the messages posted.

As seen from the results of the content analysis and coinciding with the opinion of the experts consulted, the Police of Catalonia managed the perception and the message during the crisis from their Twitter account. At this point, the user @mossos in the social network managed communication by alternatively becoming a complaints mailbox, information receiver, live information transmitter or press room, depending on what each moment required. It is, therefore, an example of service communication, informative communication and, above all, relational communication based on the theories of public relations. As a whole,

this variety of communication typologies, registered globally in a crisis context, constitutes a structure of excellence in public relations in a digital environment (Grunig, 2009; Wright & Hinson, 2009; Paine, 2011).

Regarding the answers of the experts, in accordance with the characteristics of the social network studied, the management of this crisis was noted as containing two elements essential to crisis management: immediacy (intrinsic to Twitter and online communication) and credibility (the case of a verified account with a verifiable background). In addition, @mossos went one step further, including in Twitter a basic public relations action in crisis management by facilitating the access of the media to official sources. In addition, as it is an open and free account, it became a source of information for citizens, thus fulfilling a dual objective: to reach professionals and to transmit, without media filters, a univocal and unequivocal message about the investigations and information provided by the Police of Catalonia.

The results obtained in the content analysis allow us to conclude that the renown of the Twitter account of @mossos –and therefore of the organization– increased as a result of the management of this crisis. The number of retweets helps us to understand that the management of the crisis was a public relations exercise that contributed to increase the reputation, image and renown of the Police of Catalonia. This, in addition, is supported by Marc Homedes (E-News, 2017), responsible for managing crisis communication after the Barcelona bombing, who states that the Twitter posts of the security forces were disseminated in media all over the world, which provides an added value of transfer and international visibility of the management of crisis communication carried out by the Mossos d'Esquadra.

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