

"Chk Chk Boom": Communication risks in the information age

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The significant profile achieved by 19 year old Sydneysider Clare Werbeloff - the "Chk Chk Boom" girl - within a relatively short period of time demonstrates the phenomenal ability of new technologies to rapidly disseminate information and the very real implications this has for organisations.

Werbeloff sky-rocketed to fame in the blink of an eye as a purported eyewitness to a shooting in Kings Cross, Sydney. Despite her subsequent decision to hire a publicist, she later admitted on *A Current Affair* her account was a hoax.

In less than 24 hours, her story had been viewed worldwide more than 277,751 times on YouTube, a US T-shirt line had been created, and a rap song had been born, and more than 85 interview requests were received from media as far afield as Dubai. The matter was even referred to in Federal Parliament and, of course, attracted extensive media coverage.

While the implications for Ms Werbeloff are yet to be determined, this case demonstrates the speed with which information can be disseminated and, as a result, how this dramatically reduces the time frame within which organisations have to respond when facing a crisis.

A major implication of new technologies is the even greater pressure placed on organisations to respond quickly when an incident occurs.

Remember those images of a US Airways jet floating in the Hudson River in New York within minutes of the incident occurring? Before the invention of mobile phones with cameras, and before CNN and Fox News 24-hour coverage, organisations had a much longer time to react.

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It is important to get ahead of the information avalanche with simple factual statements to the media and other stakeholders and demonstrate a willingness to engage.

This imperative needs to be balanced carefully, however, with the overriding principle that only facts should be communicated. It is always a mistake to go out publicly with information which has not been verified. The errors are soon entrenched and it is a far greater challenge to correct them after the fact than to ensure their accuracy in advance.

The power of new technologies can also be harnessed for the benefit of the organisation. The Obama election campaign, which masterfully used the internet as a powerful communication tool, is a good example. The internet was a critical vehicle not just for fund-raising purposes but also to reach out directly to voters, often by-passing traditional media.

New technologies create as many opportunities and threats, it all depends on how they are harnessed.

Geoff Fowlstone is the founder and Principal of Fowlstone Communications, an independent strategic communications firm.

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Contact Sparke Helmore

Phone: (02) 9373 3555 | Fax: (02) 9373 3599 | Email: webinfo@sparke.com.au