The Anthony Weiner Twitter Scandal: Causes and Lessons Learned

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Introduction

This piece chronicles the infamous lewd Twitter image and subsequent public relations missteps that led to the resignation of former New York Representative Anthony Weiner. Attention is given to the components and context of this public relations crisis, how old media, new media, and crisis communication theories apply to it, what actions could have been taken to prevent the crisis, and what lessons can be learned from the outcome of this event.

<u>Timeline of the Crisis</u>

May 27th, 2011 marked the beginning of the end of a promising political career for then New York Representative Anthony Weiner. It was on this day that a digital photo showing a man's crotch was sent from the downstate Democrat's Twitter account to a female Seattle college student. The photo was quickly deleted, but not before 45,000 Twitter users who followed Weiner had a chance to view it (Otis, 2011).

The representative sent a follow-up tweet in an apparent effort to sidestep any inconvenient questions pertaining to the image's online debut. He exclaimed "Tivo shot. FB hacked. Is my blender gonna attack me next? #TheToasterIsVeryLoyal" (The Telegraph, 2011). Unfortunately for this highly visible congressman representing New York's ninth district, the aforementioned event marked the outbreak of what would become a very public and politically charged social media scandal that was in the making as early as ten months prior.

May 28th, 2011 brought new problems for Anthony Weiner. The lewd image he sent from his Twitter account the previous day had been noticed by an individual named Dan Wolfe – a Twitter user who, at the time, used the handle "@PatriotUSA76." He was the catalyst that made the crotch photo go viral. Within the span of one day, the image made its way to all of Dan Wolfe's followers and many others, and caught the attention of conservative blogger Andrew Breitbart. The image was posted to Breitbart's website – biggovernment.com – before the day was through (Preston, 2011).

As the aforementioned crotch photo began reaching larger and larger audiences, the media took notice, and began asking more questions. Weiner and members of his congressional staff could feel the pressure building. They knew they had to respond, so spokesman David Arnold emailed the Associated Press on May 29th claiming "Anthony's accounts were obviously hacked…he doesn't know the person named by the hacker, and we will be consulting on what steps to take next" (Newman, 2011).

Through the remaining days of May, Anthony Weiner stuck to this story. The congressman became dismissive of questions focusing on what had come to be called "Weiner Gate" (Otis, 2011), telling CNN on May 31st, 2011 "I was hacked. It happens to people, you move on. This is a prank – not a terribly creative one – and it's a distraction"

(Sherman, 2011). However, in an interview with the same news outlet the following day, visible fractures began to appear in the storyline Anthony Weiner had been using to defend himself.

June of 2011 opened for Representative Weiner with a one-on-one interview directed by CNN's Wolf Blitzer. It became clear early on in their exchange that Weiner was not willing to state definitively whether or not the lewd photo sent from his Twitter account on May 27th was of him. He told Blitzer "I don't want to say with certitude to you something that I don't know to be the certain truth" (Blitzer & Weiner, 2011). Weiner delivered a similar message to MSNBC that same day (Condon, 2011), and things got progressively worse for the congressman from there.

Five days after the interviews with CNN and MSNBC, Andrew Breitbart's biggovernment.com website posted additional images and online communications that it claimed were sent by Representative Weiner to an unidentified woman. Various online and print tabloid publications posted similar material (The Telegraph, 2011). These new images and conversations were too serious for Weiner to ignore. One featured the congressman with no shirt, the other was purportedly of his genitals, and another clearly showed Weiner's face as he held a sign pointing to himself that said "me." The lawmaker decided he had to address this latest development directly and in clear view of the public.

Weiner called a press conference the same day the new photos were released, and made some stunning admissions. He said, "to be clear, the picture was of me and I sent it…over the past few years I have engaged in several inappropriate conversations conducted over Twitter, Facebook, e-mail, and occasionally on the phone with women I have met online." The representative went on to say that most of the communications took place before his marriage, but admitted some took place afterward (CBS New York, 2011).

The admissions Anthony Weiner made during the aforementioned press conference cost him much of the support he had enjoyed since his Twitter scandal began. Representative Allyson Schwartz, who at the time handled recruitment and member services for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, joined Democratic Senator Mark Pryor, Representatives Michael Michaud and Joe Donnelly, and former

Democratic National Committee chairman Timothy Kaine in calling for Anthony Weiner to resign his seat in Congress (Cillizza & Kane, 2011). By June 11ᵗʰ, 2011, then House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi released her statement calling for Weiner's resignation (Barbaro & Hernandez, 2011). The walls were closing in on the scandal-plagued lawmaker.

On June 16ᵗʰ, 2011, Pelosi and her Democratic colleagues got their wish. Following his announcement of plans to seek psychological treatment for his online behavior with women, Anthony Weiner chose that day to preside over a disjointed and brief news conference at a senior center in his district. He told the media and members of the public "I am announcing my resignation from Congress, so my colleagues can get back to work, my neighbors can choose a new representative and most important so that my wife and I can continue to heal from the damage I have caused" (Hernandez, 2011). This ended the career of a once promising politician who at one point was thought to be a strong contender for the New York City Mayoral race in 2013.

<u>Crisis Components and Context</u>

Coombs (2012) defines a crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes." The social media scandal that befell Anthony Weiner certainly fits the criteria of the above definition. Weiner's stakeholders – constituents, the media, fellow lawmakers, and staff members being chief among them – had certain expectations of the congressman that were threatened by the scandal he became involved in.

Constituents and staff members expected Weiner to honorably carry out his full term in Congress, fellow lawmakers expected him to act in a way that contributed to the actualization of their collective political goals, and the media expected Weiner to honestly respond to their questions and queries. As the scandal progressed, it became clear that these expectations would go unfulfilled. This seriously impacted Weiner's performance as a lawmaker and the political party that he belonged to, thereby generating negative outcomes. Based on this information, Anthony Weiner's social media scandal can

accurately be labeled a crisis. At this point, it is important to examine how and why the scandal grew from an issues management situation into a crisis event.

The steady escalation of Anthony Weiner's social media scandal from a manageable issue to the point of a crisis hinges on a single phrase: failure to monitor. If components of Weiner's communications staff had been properly monitoring what the congressman was doing with his social media accounts, the online behavior that led to the distribution of the infamous crotch photo to thousands of Twitter users could have been halted.

For instance, it's true that conservative operatives calling themselves the #bornfreecrew on Twitter "closely monitored those whom Mr. Weiner was following, taking it upon themselves to contact young women they believed to be schoolgirls, and urging them publicly to stay away from him...by early May, members of the group were also speculating that Mr. Weiner would be caught in a sex scandal" (Preston, 2011). This begs the question, if an outside hostile group was able to predict Mr. Weiner's public implosion, why wasn't his own communications staff able to do the same, and then work to prevent it from happening?

Equally disastrous was the press conference revelation in early June of 2011 that Anthony Weiner lied to the public for a full week about the lewd image sent from his Twitter account. This was the point at which public perception of the lawmaker became decidedly negative, and Weiner lost what remaining credibility he had with constituents and colleagues. The public began to perceive that the congressman was now at the center of a crisis, and since crises are perceptual, he really was at the center of a crisis.

Along with the factors introduced previously, the context in which Anthony Weiner's social media scandal occurred had a lot to do with how and why the event moved from an issue to a crisis. It's important to understand that the spring of 2011 was a politically charged time period in Washington with high priority issues up for consideration. Things like momentum for New York Democrats from a recently won special election in Buffalo, a legislative fight over Medicare spending and the U.S. debt ceiling, posturing by Democrats to re-take the majority in the House of Representatives, and worries over an upcoming legislative redistricting process in 2012 were all top of

mind for politicians of both parties (Cillizza & Kane, 2011; Halbfinger & Hernandez, 2011).

When taken as a whole, these factors created an environment in which Republicans were eager to take advantage of any crisis situation that could weaken the Democrats. At the same time, Democrats were eager to disavow themselves of any individual whose actions could become a liability for the party. This is precisely what Anthony Weiner had become – a tactical and strategic liability for the Democratic Party.

Old Media, New Media, and Applicable Crisis Communication Theories

Clearly, both old and new media played a prominent role in the crisis under review here. The crisis itself centered on one specific lewd image, and new media provided the means for said image to go viral – essentially giving birth to the issue that eventually became a crisis. Old media is what kept the crisis alive and growing through successive news cycles – introducing the event and opinions on it to stakeholders who lacked a social media presence. Both media types played key roles in Anthony Weiner's social media crisis, an event that clearly illustrated a number of crisis communication theories.

As Anthony Weiner's missteps with Twitter intensified into a full-scale crisis situation in a matter of days, observers saw three communication theories on display. These are attribution theory, the situational crisis communication theory, and apologia theory. Attribution theory is based on the belief that individuals will seek to assign blame for the cause of an event – they will ascribe crisis responsibility (Weiner, 1985, 1986). This is clearly a belief that Weiner and his communications staff held themselves, as they went to great lengths to assign responsibility for the representative's lewd Twitter image to some outside actor – a fictitious hacker who supposedly hijacked the congressman's social media account.

This leads to a discussion of the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) and it's relationship to Anthony Weiner's social media crisis. SCCT applies attribution theory-based ideas to a wide array of crises, and identifies three crisis clusters that are tied to the assignment of responsibility for a crisis based on its type. The clusters are victim (weak crisis responsibility attribution), accidental (minimal crisis responsibility

attribution), and intentional (strong crisis responsibility attribution) (Coombs, 2007). Although Anthony Weiner's social media crisis is clearly part of the 'intentional' cluster, the congressman and his staff realized that it would be preferable to position the event as a crisis that's part of the 'victim' cluster because this would likely result in a lower level of crisis responsibility attribution.

Also present in the timeline of Anthony Weiner's social media crisis is apologia theory – "an effort to defend reputation and protect image…the organization's effort may deny, explain, or apologize for the action through communication discourse" (Fearn-Banks, 2011). Based on apologia theory, Benoit (1995) has identified five general strategies commonly used to restore a damaged image. They are denial, evade responsibility, reduce offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Anthony Weiner made use of each strategy – he denied the existence of a crisis, evaded responsibility for the entire issue, attacked his accusers in the media to reduce offensiveness, offered corrective action through mention of a legal investigation (Memmott, 2011), and attempted mortification by eventually offering a full public apology.

However, as Ware and Linkugel (1973) point out, "strategies of denial are obviously useful to the speaker only to the extent that such negotiations do not constitute a known distortion of reality or to the point that they conflict with other beliefs held by the audience." Once Weiner admitted responsibility for the lewd photo sent from his Twitter account, the strategies of denial, evade responsibility, reduce offensiveness, and corrective action became useless to him. He could only turn to mortification as a viable alternative.

Outcomes, Preventive Actions, and Lessons Learned

The social media crisis experienced by Anthony Weiner resulted in some severe and significant outcomes. On a personal level, the congressman's reputation was destroyed, his relationship with his wife suffered (Hernandez, 2011), he was forced to resign from office, his aspirations of running for mayor of New York City evaporated, and, having been a life-long politician, he faced the prospect of prolonged unemployment. On an organizational level, the Democratic Party found it increasingly difficult to move forward with top policy issues during and after Weiner's crisis, the

group faced attacks from political enemies (Halbfinger & Hernandez, 2011), it was split for a period over the issue of support for Weiner, and it lost Weiner's congressional seat to a Republican challenger in a special election. It should be noted that the district Weiner represented had not been under GOP control since 1923 (Geiger, 2011).

To be sure, changes were implemented following Weiner's crisis with the goal of mitigating damage and preventing replication. As a party, Democrats distanced themselves from the former representative as best they could. As an individual, Anthony Weiner visited a rehabilitation center to "become a better husband and healthier person" (Katz, 2011). However, much could have been done to prevent escalation during the pre-crisis stage, and the crisis itself could have been better managed to mitigate the aforementioned outcomes. This all ties into the lessons crisis communicators need to learn from Anthony Weiner's ordeal, which are as follows – political leaders require training that targets new media as effectively as it targets old media, social media monitoring is key to identifying and preventing crises, responsibility for ethical wrong-doing must be accepted quickly and openly, and it is critical to have a solid, research-based crisis management plan in place before a crisis develops.

As mentioned earlier, the central measure that should have been taken to prevent the crisis under review is social media monitoring. If Weiner's staff had been watching what the representative was doing online as intently as his enemies, the warning signs of an impending crisis would have been apparent. Beyond this, Anthony Weiner should have, aside from exercising better judgment, received better guidance on the power and pitfalls tied to social media use. Indeed, "wouldn't elected leaders be better served by placing greater emphasis on receiving more senior level counsel from professionals who are deeply experienced in leveraging social media channels in building brands, managing issues, and sharing ideas?" (Perlut, 2011).

Finally, Weiner and his staff should have taken a far different approach to managing the crisis they were experiencing. Benoit and Brinson (1994) have said, "we recommend that those guilty of wrong-doing accept their responsibility immediately and apologize. To do otherwise can risk even more damage to one's image." This is a research-supported conclusion that Weiner and his staff ignored. Had the congressman

simply accepted responsibility for what he had done in the first place, he would not have opened himself up to additional damage from lying to the public for days. Additionally, the progression of the crisis made it clear that Weiner and his associates unfortunately decided to take an 'it won't happen to me' approach to crisis management. They did not have a clear and accessible crisis management plan in place prior to the outbreak of the crisis, and the results were obviously disastrous.

Resources

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