

Banning Mobile Devices: Workplace Policies That Selectively Exclude Can Shape Crisis Communication

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing need to understand how mobile devices are used to reach people in a crisis. This study focuses on how work organizations play a gatekeeping role in how their employees receive crisis information. Relying on research in the digital divide and organizational justice, this study compares two different types of organizations and their policies banning or allowing mobile devices at work. Three major themes emerged: having omnipotent supervisors, being powerless workers, and experiencing information holes. These themes highlight the burden placed on organizations to create more inclusive digital policies to ensure that employees do not fall through the net of crisis management systems. Additionally, these findings necessitate new discussions among crisis and emergency management scholars that include the current understanding of the digital divide, specifically as it relates to digital inequality in the workplace.

Keywords

Crisis management, Digital divide, ICTs, organizational justice, mobile devices, policy

INTRODUCTION

A robust body of research has begun to illustrate how new media—e.g., Twitter, text messages—have expanded opportunities to reach people during a crisis (Hughes and Palen, 2009; Schultz, Utz, and Goritz, 2011; Tapia, Moore, and Johnson, 2013; Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar, 2011). We have learned how the public shares what they know, almost immediately, as a crisis unfolds (Sutton, Palen, and Shklovski, 2008) and how people respond in evacuations (Mileti and Peek, 2000). We also know that organizations use people's mobile devices to send them emergency alerts in addition to sharing ongoing crisis information (Stephens, Barrett, and Mahometta, 2013). But what happens when organizations restrict employee access to new media? On the surface, creating organizational policies limiting digital use at work may be a logical solution for managers seeking to recapture the time wasted by employees using social media for personal reasons (Griffiths, 2003). But consider the implications of having groups of employees without access to technologies during a crisis.

The digital divide has been extensively studied over the past decade (see Hargittai and Hsieh, 2013) and it has moved beyond a binary distinction separating people on the basis of access to technologies. Most early work on the digital divide identified socioeconomic factors as key drivers of access (DiMaggio and Hargittai, 2001). Contemporary perspectives offer the term *digital inequalities* (Hargittai and Hsieh, 2013) to reflect the gradations influencing technology use. In this study, we further expand these gradations to focus on the implications of organizational digital inequalities and how they influence crisis management. When organizations impose digital policies that restrict access to mobile devices at work (Half, 2009; Zachry and Ferro, 2013), the resulting digital divide is due to structural implementations, not social determinants.

Mobile Devices and Work

Mobile devices have changed how we work as well as our work-home boundaries (Wajcman, Bittman, and Brown, 2008). This is especially the case with urgent information, since much of the mobile communication research has identified security, safety, and coordination as the core uses of mobile devices (e.g., Ling & Yttri,

2002). Mobile devices not only provide a channel for timely messages related to crises and emergencies, but they also allow others to reach us with urgent information (Stephens, et al., 2013). Yet many organizations do not provide mobile phones to all workers (Kim, Chan, and Gupta, 2007; PC Today, 2012) and there is a push for employees to bring their own device to work (BYOD: PC Today, 2012). While these BYOD policies can contribute to organizational digital divides since not all employees can afford to provide their own devices, so can *formal policies* limiting the use of mobile devices at work.

Scholars regularly acknowledge that socioeconomic status and job role—e.g., knowledge work vs. manual labor—affect whether people have access to computer technologies at work (Campbell, 2001; Rodino-Colocino, 2006). Those who work with their hands may not need immediate access to computers, and some do not have the computer literacy skills to use these tools (Rodino-Colocino, 2006). Yet today, many people own mobile devices that offer them internet access in addition to providing the more traditional phone functions (i.e. calls and text messages). With this growing worldwide trend in mobile device use (Gartner, 2013), we are only beginning to learn how digital inequality through mobile devices occurs (see Pearce and Rice, 2013) and how these tools might be capable of bridging the divide both in our personal lives and at work.

This study builds on the growing research examining how mobile devices are used for crisis management and addresses the research question: *How does a work-place policy banning mobile devices affect the receipt of urgent information?*

METHOD

Data Collection

The current study is part of a larger qualitative data collection effort launched to understand how employees and managers in organizations communicate their safety and emergency procedures. Focus groups provided the data source for this study and they were conducted with workers in two types of organizations located in the Midwestern United States: a single-location fast food company, and a janitorial supply company employing both knowledge workers and a day/night janitorial staff. Focus groups were chosen as the data collection method because they allow multiple participants to interact (Morgan, 1988) and discuss topics related to safety.

Focus group recruitment and participants.

Focus group participants worked for the organizations included in this study and they voluntarily agreed to participate. The human resources departments and managers in these organizations helped the researcher ensure a diverse group of participants. There were six separate focus groups conducted for this study ranging in size from six to 12 members. There were 46 participants across all six groups and because one-third of the workers in these industries spoke Spanish as their first language, one of the focus groups was conducted in Spanish. The workers held employment at their respective organization spanning from new hires (with less than six months experience), to employees with over 35 years of experience. Out of the 46 participants, 18 held some type of supervisory position.

Focus group protocol.

When the employees arrived for the one-hour focus group, they selected a pseudonym and these names were used in all recordings and transcriptions. Focus group questions had two main objectives: (1) to understand how employees used technology at work, and (2) to understand how safety and emergency communication was delivered and perceived by these diverse organizations. The questions were designed to structure the discussion and contained 14 questions. For example, the following highlight how the questions related to each objective: “What type of access to the Internet do you have during your typical work day?” “How do you learn about emergencies in your organization?” Detailed questions are available from the first author upon request.

Data Analysis

The focus groups were recorded and transcribed (the Spanish focus group was also translated to English) resulting in 128 pages of single spaced text. The data were analyzed using grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Two separate researchers coded all the data independently into inductively

generated conceptual categories. After this open coding, both researchers met, reviewed all the coding together, and used axial coding to collapse the open codes into broad categories. This process resulted in 18 categories. Finally, using constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), each category was compared and organized for theoretical and practical similarity. Three major themes emerged: *having omnipotent supervisors, being powerless workers, and experiencing information holes*. Finally, the examination of these themes produced a broader understanding of what it means to be a mobile worker and how mobility without access to mobile devices creates challenging crisis management needs.

RESULTS

The research question in this study examined how workplace policies banning mobile devices affected how people receive urgent information. Next, we share details from the janitorial staff and supervisors and then compare those findings to fast food and knowledge workers. We provide selective quotes to illustrate our themes. The policy banning mobile devices only applied to workers below a supervisor level. As a result of this selective policy, three major themes emerged: omnipotent supervisors, powerless workers, and information holes. The first theme, *omnipotent supervisors*, describes how supervisors control all the information needs of their subordinates and thus are gatekeepers responsible for determining what information will be shared. Supervisors were not only *allowed* to use mobile devices, but they were *required* to be accessible at all times. The level of interaction that supervisors had with their employees varied depending on whether the janitorial staff worked the day or night shift, and whether the supervisor and subordinates worked in the same building. Supervisors controlled message dissemination due to the reliance on verbal communication.

The second theme, *powerless workers*, speaks to the loss of autonomy and sometimes, dignity, that non-supervisors felt when they could not use their mobile phone. One respondent explained the effects of this policy with some embarrassment, stating that when she needed to contact a supervisor she had to “go to many buildings to ask permission to borrow a landline phone because I am not allowed to use my personal cellphone.” Some organizational members who brought their mobile devices to work said they sneaked access by hiding them from their supervisors.

We named the final theme, *information holes*, because without mobile phones the non-supervisory workers (a) missed many time-sensitive messages, (b) received messages almost a day later than intended, (c) were unreachable during portions of their work, and (d) wasted time trying to find other workers. One participant recalled a common situation when he needed find another mobile coworker and said, “there is no solution besides walking upstairs, [and] pushing the elevator back down to find the person on the first floor. But that’s a complete waste of time.” Without mobile device access, non-supervisory workers were in an information void.

Overarching Findings Relating Digital Restrictions and Crisis Communication

When interpreting these results, it is helpful to compare the effects of these types of policies between groups. The janitorial workers were distributed between several large buildings and their mobile device ban forced them to either rely on their supervisors for all crisis information, or to breach policies and risk being fired from their jobs. This can be contrasted with the fast-food organization, which also had a ban on mobile devices for all workers except supervisors. The primary difference between these organizations was worker dispersion. This policy created frustration for some of the fast food workers because while they could receive urgent messages on their own personal mobile devices at work, they could not check those messages while working. Yet these workers did not necessarily fear that they would miss crisis information because their supervisors were co-located. The fast food supervisors could physically see all their employees and notify them of urgent issues almost instantly (assuming the supervisor received the urgent message on their device and acted immediately). The janitorial supply supervisors were much more worried that they might not be able to reach their scattered employees. One employee spoke of a recent emergency evacuation and said his supervisor “couldn’t get a response from all the employees, so she was worried...when she evacuated, she was not sure if all the employees got the message or not.” The supervisors also mentioned that language barriers added additional concern because messages they shared in English were not always effectively translated and understood by their workers who spoke multiple languages.

Comparing the two organizations with digital bans to the knowledge workers in the janitorial supply company, provides a contrast for the three major themes. Knowledge workers have ready access to computers and mobile devices at work and they receive crisis and emergency messages directly. Thus, they do not express feelings of having omnipotent supervisors or being powerless workers. Instead, they complain about receiving too much information and find ways to filter messages to manage their information overload. While they also experience

information holes; their holes are self-induced instead of the result of an organizational policy. These findings illuminate the organizational digital divide occurring across different work environments. Beyond uncovering different types of organizational digital inequalities, this research suggests that structurally imposed digital restrictions may be the markings of organizational injustice. By definition, justice is comparative (Gordon, 2006), which lends well to addressing workplaces where some employees (e.g. supervisors) have unrestricted digital access and others are bound by digital policies. From a crisis management perspective, digital inequalities not only highlight organizational inefficiencies, but also generate awareness concerning how employees receive crisis information differently. From an employee perspective, feeling disadvantaged on the basis of digital access may induce what the organizational justice literature calls *relative deprivation* (Crosby, 1984; Pettigrew, 2002; Tougas and Beaton, 2002). Individuals experiencing relative deprivation may respond by voicing objections, openly or privately resisting the deprivation, and/or exiting the organization (Pettigrew, 2002; Zoogah, 2010).

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The findings from this study show how organizational policies can restrict the flow of crisis information to and from disadvantage non-managerial workers. While digital divide issues are often considered linked to socioeconomic factors, this study introduces a more complex view of digital inequality, invokes concerns about organizational justice, and reminds us that not everyone has a mobile device within reach when an emergency strikes. The major themes concerning omnipotent supervisors, powerless workers, and information holes, raise important questions concerning how we reach different types of workers with important information in a timely manner. The findings concerning mobile jobs and workforce proximity introduce a host of safety issues that workplaces and crisis managers have yet to fully consider.

This study leads in several promising directions as researchers explore how some workers might be excluded from digital communications. First, the literature on mobilities—both empirical and methodological (e.g., Buscher and Urry, 2009; Urry, 2007)—offers some promise for how we understand the needs of mobile workers. Expanding the view of mobility to include the digital divide, in addition to physical locations of jobs, can help us understand the ethical issues raised in crisis situations. While we know organizational policies structurally create digital divides, this is not the only type of divide that exists. Barriers to access may stem from a lack of universal design and compatibility with assistive technologies; both important issues for organizations to consider and scholars to research.

As we continue examining these organizational digital inequality issues, it is important to compare differences between people who have chosen not to have a mobile device at work, people who cannot afford to own a mobile device, and those who have been banned from using their devices at work due to organizational policies. We propose that these are different types of organizational digital inequalities. While all digitally divided workers experience limited access to timely information, the reason for the divide likely creates diverse types of information holes and varying interpretations of crisis risk. Research building on the vast knowledge of warning response processes (Mileti and Peek, 2000) that includes considerations of contemporary mobile devices, mobility at work, and digital inequalities, can offer an important contribution to crisis management.

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