ARTICLE

Public Relations and Social Media for Effective Crisis Communication Management

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Abstract: Crisis, natural or man-made, is inevitable in our life because of human social interactions. Crises are caused by ineffective communication yet are better solved with effective communication. Scholars have studied social media's role in crisis management as an information propagator and their cost effectiveness during a crisis. Social media can potentially influence multiple public strata during and after the crisis. Social media serves as tools for relationship management which is a crucial part of crisis management; equally, public relations also serve the same. This paper explores how effective crisis communication management can be achieved via Social Networking Systems (SNS). Drawing from the existing literature as the method used, this paper reviews articles and studies on public relations strategy and effective crisis management. It expounds on examples of how relationships can be well-managed through social media in crises. This paper has increased our knowledge of crisis management by understanding how crises are managed. Findings are that crisis communication was managed from four conceptual lenses scholars have investigated; that crises can be prevented- partially if not completely- with a proper crisis communication plan; that having a crisis communication plan may not suffice except is handled by professional relationship managers who know how to communicate and understand the use of the conventional and new media with the influential role of symmetrical communication. Therefore, the paper concluded that since crisis leads to a bad relationship due to a lack of understanding of the situation and behavior and to facilitate this, it suggests that crisis is better managed through effective public relations managers.

Keywords: crisis; communication management; public relations; social media.

Babatunde. (2022). Jurnal Bina Praja, 14(3), 543–553

543

1. Introduction

In all its forms, crisis is inevitable in human society. The crisis occurs not only at the organizational level but also at the public or general level. It comes in different forms, natural or man-made crises created by different situations. The crisis could occur as a natural occurrence or result of human social interactions. For example, an earthquake, volcano, or flood is natural, while political, economic, cultural, informational, or environmental crises are considered artificial or man-made. The latter crisis may occur at the national level due to cultural or sectarian differences in a societal context; at times, the crisis may be a hegemonic one between two different nations vying for leadership. The occurrence of such issues eventually leads to the different consequences of crises depending on the management or mismanagement of a crisis.

Moreover, crisis occurrences could be attributed to ineffective communication, and such a crisis is better solved with good communication. Scholars agree that for many crises to be successfully managed, it requires well-planned communication. This suggests the vital role communication plays in crisis management (Garnett & Kouzmin, 2007; Guo et al., 2021) and how its role could make or mar the effort of crisis management. Also, the complex interplay between communication and the media cannot be underemphasized in managing a crisis. Therefore, scholars have examined the use of media, especially social media at different stages in crisis communication management (Reuter et al., 2018) and have come up with the best practice which aims to improve organizational and professional practice in this context (Seeger, 2006).

From this vantage point, this paper argues that crises are better handled through public relations practice to effectively manage relationships which is core to crises communication management with a perfect media synergy.

Therefore, this paper explores previous studies and experiences of how social media have been employed to manage different crises. Along this line, the paper first defines crisis communication management and presents a mechanism to detect looming crisis signals alongside preventive strategy. Second, it outlines guidelines for effective crisis management and explicates the role of social media use in crisis communication in the light of a review of the best ten practices. Also, it presents four conceptual lenses of crisis communication management from public relations perspectives (Garnett & Kouzmin, 2007) – though with a slight modification of the lenses. The paper concludes with the inference that effective crisis communication management is a product of professional public relations practice and media synergy.

To contextualize crisis communication, it is imperative to view scholars' definitions of crisis. Scholars have defined crisis from different views. Heath and Palenchar (as cited in Austin et al., 2012, p. 191) define a crisis as an event that "creates an issue, keeps it alive, or gives it strength." Burnett (1998, p. 476) sees crisis as "a disruption that physically affects a system as a whole and threatens its basic assumptions, subjective sense of self, and existential core. Coombs (2021, p. 2) extracted common traits to crisis definitions and thus defined it as "an event that is unpredictable, a major threat that can have a negative effect on the organization, industry, or stakeholders if handled improperly." From these definitions, it is apparent that most scholarly literature focuses on the organizational or industrial crisis, which may be intentional or industrial. The implication here is that most scholarly papers incline towards organizational crises. This inclination, due to their occupied position in the industry, has made public relations professionals arguably the crisis communication experts because of their skillful experience in handling organization's communication that falls on their shoulders (Burnett, 1998).

From the definitions above, it is clear that crisis are threats that have the potential of dire consequences such as financial loss, reputation damage, and military, e.g., Russia Vs. Ukraine, intellectual (e.g., Academic Staff Union of Universities strike Vs. Nigerian govt), psychological war, or even relationship severance. Therefore, to ward off a crisis or mitigate its effects, a well-organized crisis communication plan must exist with guidelines and principles to follow.

However, the concept of crisis communication in this context needs clearance. It refers to a set of factors or guidelines put together by the concerned people to prevent, contain, or mitigate crisis effects (Leta & Chan, 2021). Though some scholars use the concept of crisis communication interchangeably with crisis management (Barry, 1984), Coombs (2021) believes that crisis management is more precise. Because a crisis is a communication problem and is considered to be broader, thus comprises crisis management steps. Nevertheless, both terms are used synonymously here (Leta & Chan, 2021).

2. Methods

This paper adopts a desk review method to collect the extant and current articles and studies to form the basis of this publication. Some criteria used in selecting the papers are keywords search such as public relations, crisis management, disaster management, crisis communication, etc. No year was selected, as this would limit the search. Since the aims and objectives of this paper are to understand and document how crises have been managed in stages, variables involved, and communicated in different situations and conditions, it is therefore imperative to review any publication about the topic.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Crisis Prevention Mechanism

A crisis does not just occur but puts forward some symptoms that develop into a real crisis. These symptoms represent warning signs of a looming crisis. Identifying these signs and taking the appropriate actions to defuse them is an effective path to crisis prevention.

Since crises of all kinds are unpredictable and are time-pressured events that require a swift, planned response, this necessitates the availability of a well-prepared document that specifies who does what and at what time and gives details of the sequence of steps to follow. This document is referred to as a crisis management plan and has four basic factors: prevention, preparation, performance, and learning (Coombs, 2021; Wut et al., 2021).

Prevention, they say, is better than cure. The best strategy for crisis management is to prevent its occurrence by detecting early warnings and taking the right actions. This strategy leads to preparation for crisis. *Preparation* involves identifying the potential crises that can hit the system and then preparing for them in the form of a crisis management plan. Once this preparation is in place, it is practically *performed* – through crisis simulation. Finally, the crisis management team evaluates its performance to know what was right or wrong in the plan that needs to be corrected – *learning*.

There must be certain effective mechanisms to avert a looming crisis and detect its warning signs. Coombs (2021) suggested establishing a scanning system as a basic element of signal detection. This system first involves scanning the general environment for a situation or information that could metamorphose into a crisis. Then, the scanned situation or information is analyzed and evaluated for its gravity. Crisis can also be prevented through examination of issues management, risk assessment, and relationships building for potential crisis signals (Coombs, 2021; Coombs & Laufer, 2018).

3.2. Issues Management

Issue management is a proactive step that attempts to identify an issue, analyze it, and take actions to curtail it or turn it around in a favorable way that would lessen its likely negative effect. Issues management can address internal and external concerns with an emphasis on societal and political issues (Coombs, 2021; Dutton & Jackson, 1987; Dutton & Ottensmeyer, 1987).

Babatunde. (2022). Jurnal Bina Praja, 14(3), 543–553

545

Resolving the issue in a way that does not result in a crisis is an important aspect of issue management. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) [*a union responsible for the welfare of the teaching staff in Nigerian universities*] strike is an example of an issue for public relations professionals to manage before it disintegrates into a real crisis. Put differently, at any given time, the Union (ASUU) is an issue for public relations at the Federal level to manage and prevent from escalating into a crisis. Therefore, when an issue is identified, the concerned stakeholders make concerted efforts to resolve the issue through effective communication and set the tone of the deliberation. When these efforts stop the issue from becoming a real crisis, then issues management serves as a crisis prevention strategy (Coombs, 2021).

3.3. Risk Management

Issues are potential risks that could become a threatening time bomb to any system when left unattended. For example, ignoring or turning a deaf ear to the ASUU issues raised above are potential risks for the stakeholders: the government, parents, and the academic staff of universities, as well as the students, who will unduly suffer from the consequences of ignoring the warnings of a strike. Risk management, therefore, is a preventive measure of crisis management in an attempt to forestall or reduce the risks ahead (Smallwood, 1995; Wut et al., 2021). However, not all crises can be prevented completely; thus, preparation for crisis becomes an imperative task.

3.4. Crisis Preparation

Every society or organization is prone to different crises. So, every society or organization must have a standby crisis preparation strategy which is the art of gathering information on the nature of the different types of crises that could hit a society or an organization.

To prepare for potential crises, six steps must be followed. According to Coombs (2021), these steps are: diagnosing vulnerabilities, assessing crisis types, selecting and training the crisis team, selecting and training the spokesperson, developing the crisis management plan, and reviewing the communication system.

Nevertheless, only two important steps of crisis preparation which are: diagnosing vulnerabilities and assessing crisis, are discussed here.

3.5. Effective Crisis Management Variables

Scholars who have investigated different crisis situations and examined how the situations were managed have, from the avalanche of crises studied, documented some steps for effective crises management (Coombs, 2021; Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Lerbinger, 1997; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). Though Coombs and Holladay (2002) critiqued the crisis typologies to serve as a guide in managing crisis for the classification are created out of crisis response strategies context; nevertheless, the crisis types still serve as a starting point to devise an effective crisis management plan. From this vantage point, scholars advance Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) as the most cited theory in crisis communication research (Roshan et al., 2016; Su et al., 2019) that articulates the variables, assumptions, and relationships to be considered in selecting response strategies that fit the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). So, in this context, crisis response strategy focuses on the way communication is used to achieve results from the ten suggested response strategies (Bundy et al., 2017; Coombs, 2021; Roshan et al., 2016).

So, managing a crisis effectively entails understanding and identifying the four major variables: *1- types of crises, 2- phases or stages of crises, 3- systems, and 4 stakeholders*, which are responsible for the crisis (Burnett, 1998; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993).

3.6. Variable One: Types of the Crisis

No system can prepare for all types of crises, no matter what the resources available at its disposal. Along this line of reasoning, crisis experts have investigated several kinds of crisis management and classified them into different types. The classification is to help a scholar or crisis management team (CMT) to locate a crisis in its locale. Pearson and Mitroff (1993) identified seven types of crises that evolved from a five-year study of human-induced crisis research. Coombs listed nine types of crises which were later refined and expanded in a subsequent study to thirteen types (Coombs, 2021; Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

This classification creates a crisis continuum that helps managers identify types of crises, facilitates the collection of information, and shows a choice of crisis response that matches the crisis level (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). This classification is valuable because it simplifies complex structures and helps to organize information to facilitate strategic planning (Burnett, 1998).

3.7. Variable Two: Phases of the Crisis

Crises have different life cycles or stages they pass through. Scholars have identified five phases with different nomenclatures. These different stages of the crisis do have inherent dangers and opportunities peculiar to their selves (Ostaev et al., 2020; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). How each phase is managed will determine the overall outcome of the crisis management. The phases are:

a. *Signal detection* which Fink (as cited in Coombs, 2021) called the prodromal stage to detect warning signals that indicate a looming crisis. A system can only discover the signals with an effective crisis management plan that has passed the acid test. Frequent simulation and updates of the crisis management plan help at this stage.

b. *The prevention/preparation phase* is to create a crisis team with a well-established and clear line of information. The crisis team prepares and searches for a potential crisis. Once indicative signals are detected, the team swings to work against them to prevent them from developing into a crisis. However, some crises would still strike regardless of the high level of preparedness for crisis prevention. This implies that all crises cannot be prevented; rather, preparedness can only manage and cushion the effects of the inevitable ones. Therefore, containment and damage limitation steps are inevitable.

c. *The containment phase* is to contain the crisis damages and to cushion the crisis effects. Effective management of this variable would curb the crisis and prevent its spread. Because "damage containment mechanisms and activities are virtually impossible to invent during the heat of a crisis" (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993, p. 53) therefore, strategies have to be formulated in this phase.

d. *The recovery phase* signals the end of the crisis, and the crisis management team brings back normality to operations or relationships, whatever the case may be. The crisis cannot be over until the team's action says it is over.

e. *The learning phase* is mainly a time for reflection. The crisis team reviews and critiques the situation to learn from it. By so doing, the team will discern both the negative and positive sides of the crisis response and, thus, amend the crisis management plan accordingly for better crises response in the future (Mitroff, 1994).

3.8. Variable Three: Systems

A system is a set of things put together to form a whole. Crises occur due to interactions of this set of things working as multiple systems. The crisis team must understand how each system operates; otherwise, all efforts to prevent or respond to a crisis could trigger other crises (Mitroff, 1994). Pearson and Mitroff (1993) mentioned five types of systems: technical, human factor, infrastructure, cultural, and attitudes/beliefs. The

most influential of these systems on crisis response and preparedness is the cultural and attitudes/beliefs systems.

The cultural and attitude systems of any given organization or society would influence the ability to prepare for and manage the crisis. Cultural system means ways individual and societal culture shapes and influences the types of policy a society or an organization operates. For example, this policy could be an open or closed system; these reflect the attitude and belief of the authority or the team in handling the crisis. When two systems fail to see things from the viewpoint of each other because of different held beliefs, the crisis that evolved from their interactions lingers on.

3.9. Variable Four: Stakeholders

Many stakeholders, large and complex, are involved in crisis management. These stakeholders represent a variety of parties that can make crises happen or influence crisis management. They must be identified and integrated into the crisis management plan. The stakeholders are constituted because they have a direct or indirect link with the crisis and are meaningfully attached to it. The public can be individuals, institutions, or organizations (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). These stakeholders exist as relationships within the crisis management context. This is where relationship management comes-in in crisis management because of the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the public and the crisis.

Stakeholders in crisis management are basically of two types: *functional* organizational stakeholders and *archetypal* organizational stakeholders (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). The functional organizational stakeholders are the potential groups or individuals in a typical organizational system; the archetypal stakeholders are categorized beyond the normal organizational roles. Under the functional organizational stakeholders are found the media, union, competitors, special interest, management, etc. The archetypal organizational stakeholders include victims, villains, enemies, allies, heroes, etc. Failure to consider this broad range of stakeholders causes unsuccessful crisis management, and some fall prey to another yet major crises (Mitroff, 1994).

Moreover, these stakeholders are the important publics to reckon with in crisis management, especially the powerful media that shapes the public perception of the crisis and, more importantly the social media, which is a complex one and plays a vital role in shaping a crisis (Bundy et al., 2017). The complexity of the media and its role result from the multiplicity of users. Along this line, Austin et al. (2012) identify three types of media publics who produce and consume social media information before, during, and after crises; the publics' dimensions are *1- Influential social media creators*, who create crisis information for others to consume; *2- Social media followers* who consume the influential social media creators' crisis information; and *3- Social media inactive,* who may consume influential social media creators' crisis information indirectly through word-of-mouth communication with social media followers. This dimension of the public indicates the severity of the social media and the relevant audience to be considered in the crisis communication plan.

3.10. Strategic use of Social Media in Crisis

Social media has become a vital asset for crisis management and are fast becoming the most preferred means of information sourcing and communication for crisis dynamics. Studies have documented social media use during emergency cases. (Kaufhold et al., 2019, 2020; Reuter & Kaufhold, 2018; Utz et al., 2013; Wetzstein et al., 2014). Social media are here operationalized as different categories or groups of websites such as forums and messages board, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc., that are almost free access to the user and allow the creation and exchange of information in dialogue and two-way communication among the diverse public because of their technological capabilities (Kirkham & Muthaly, 2015; Rainer et al., 2013; Roshan et al., 2016). Thus, social media are digital tools and applications that enable an open online exchange of information through interactive communication (Austin et al., 2012; Yates & Paquette,

2011). During a disaster, social media gives power to the users at the expense of the organization or the other party in crisis (Kirkham & Muthaly, 2015). This implies that social media audience increases and perceives social media to be more credible than traditional media (Procopio & Procopio, 2007). In this way, the media landscape is fast changing; therefore, the nature, style, tone, and medium of communication with the audience must change in a crisis.

Though most of the extant studies on social media use in crisis communication are circumscribed to natural disasters, and people use social media in crises communication across all the phases of both natural and man-made crises for different motives (Wetzstein et al., 2014). These motives have popularized the use of social media since 2001 at different stages of crisis management. So, social media, SNS has enjoyed tremendous usage in managing and communicating in crises, and a body of studies has equally investigated the role and usage of SM in managing emergencies, conflicts, and crises (Kaufhold et al., 2019, 2020; Reuter & Kaufhold, 2018; Wut et al., 2021). For example, when terrorists took over part of Mumbai, SNS was used to communicate and update people on the situation (Al Omoush, 2019). The world cannot forget the social role of media during the 9/11 attacks; photo-repository sites were used in the Indian Ocean tsunami and also during Hurricane Katrina in 2005; Twitter and Facebook were used in managing flood crises and to locate fire locations and to disseminate safety information during the wildfire crisis in Canada (Guo et al., 2021; Reuter et al., 2018; Sagar, 2016). Government agencies are not left out in social media usage in crises to facilitate effective crisis communication (Guo et al., 2021). This shows the effective use of social media in crisis management.

On the empirical plane, studies reveal that the public tends to use social media in crisis because of convenience, perceived function (Austin et al., 2012), and credibility (Procopio & Procopio, 2007). Moreover, mainstream media itself is a source for information on social media, and journalist sourcing for news on social media during a crisis is on the increase; this may increase social media's direct or indirect effects on audience (Austin et al., 2012).

Social media extends its effects tentacle during a crisis for users extend their networking to many people they have never met before and may never meet to seek information and opinions, thus creating a virtual community of diverse ideas and opinions (Austin et al., 2012). This virtual community that organizes itself around social media must be considered and communicated with via the same media because of the important role member of that community plays in crises (Johansson et al., 2012; Vihalemm et al., 2012). Communicating with this virtual community through social media has been positively proven for effective relationship management during a crisis (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Utz et al., 2013). Here are suggested ten guidelines used by the best practices in crisis communication.

3.11. The Ten Commandments of Crisis Communication

There is no systematic or generally acceptable strategy for managing a crisis. However, guidelines to mitigate the negative effect of crises are prescribed as an antidote to managing crises effectively.

Ten guidelines have been identified that have been explained, expanded, and tested in risk and crisis communication best practices. Sellnow and Vidoloff later added the eleventh one (Seeger, 2006; Veil et al., 2011).

1. Establish risk and crisis management policies and process approaches, 2. Plan pre-event logistics, 3. Partner with the public, 4. Listen to the public's concerns and understand the audience, 5. Communicate with honesty, candor, and openness, 6. Collaborate and coordinate with credible sources, 7. Meet the needs of the media and remain accessible.8. Communicate with compassion, concern, and empathy, 9. Accept uncertainty and ambiguity, 10. Provide messages of self-efficacy.

To improve the effectiveness of crisis communication practice, Seeger (2006) outlines and explains the general standards of the best ten crisis communication. These

Babatunde. (2022). Jurnal Bina Praja, 14(3), 543–553

549

general standards underlie an effective crisis communication plan and response. See Figure 1 for the set of the ten best practices.

Figure 1. Best practices in risk and crisis communication (National Center for Food Protection and Defense)

Source: Seeger (2006)

3.12. Crisis Management From Public Relations Lens

In placing crisis communication in the public relations domain, it is important to give a working definition of the profession. The following 88 words sentence defines public relations as:

> "...a distinctive management function that helps to establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance, and cooperation between the organization and its public; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound ethical communication techniques as its principal tools" (Cutlip & Center, 1978; Seitel, 2001).

The above definition says PR is a distinctive management function; that manages problems and issues; keeps the management abreast of latent issues; serves as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; finally, and uses research and sound, ethical, and mutual lines of communication as its principal tools.

This definition reflects guidelines and approaches to managing crisis. This implies that crisis communication is best handled through the management of communication and relationships of any existing system with others in crisis using situational theory and symmetrical communication, which form the situational crisis communication theory in public relations.

From public relations vantage point, Herrero and Pratt (1996) propose a four-step processes that characterize crises communication management. The processes are: (1) issues management – which includes scanning the environment for troublesome issues and collecting data for developing a communication strategy; (2) planning prevention – shares with issue management the task of monitoring the environment, using information, warning systems, and develop internal communication procedures; the bedrock of crisis management; (3) the crisis stage – indicates the loss of all proactive initiatives. Then, the reactive step takes a turn by responding to the crisis, preempting negative publicity, targeting its messages to the right public, and providing accurate and prompt information to the media; and (4) The post-crisis stage – marks

the stage where paying close attention is imperative to its diverse stakeholders, that is the public, relaying information to the complex media, monitoring the intensity of the issue, and finally evaluating the crisis plan effectiveness to incorporate feedback into the plan for improvement.

For the crucial roles communication plays in successful crisis management (Garnett & Kouzmin, 2007), with the fact that most crises are information and communication crises (Pijnenburg & Van Duin, 1991), crisis management is, therefore, better handled by public relations professionals.

Thus, Garnett and Kouzmin (2007) have identified four major conceptual lenses through which scholars have examined crisis communication. The conceptual lenses have helped shape the understanding of crisis communication from the public relations lens. The proposed four lenses are: (1) crisis communication as interpersonal influence; (2) crisis communication as media relations; (3) crisis communication as technology showcase; (4) and crisis communication as inter-organizational networking.

(1) *Crisis communication as an interpersonal influence* lens emphasizes the human face of crisis management. When any crisis occurs, it involves people who are to be treated with the utmost kindness. This aspect is often neglected in crisis management, thus expanding and compounding the crisis. Crisis management that incorporates this lens in its plan exhibits it in the form of the leadership appearance at the scene of the crisis to show sympathy for victims and gather respect from the people. The purpose of this perspective is what Kaufhold et al. (2020) see as to enhance a close relationship among parties concerned in the crisis and improve communication outreach by a well-trained and trustworthy officer to avoid muddling things up.

(2) *Crisis communication as a media relations* lens focuses on the media's role in mitigating or magnifying the crisis effect. It views crises as media events, especially social media, and how the media frame events form the public's perception of the ongoing crisis.

People including stakeholders obtain crisis related information from the mass media (Garnett & Kouzmin, 2007). This information forms their judgment of handling the crisis. Media may fail to disseminate accurate information, and false information will exacerbate the crisis and, thus, worsen the effects. Because during the crisis, the media tends to look at people's perceptions of the crisis as a human-interest angle to gain market share for the news media.

Therefore, public relations experts understand how to maintain good and cordial relationships with this stakeholder in crisis through media relations with all dexterity of public relations expertise.

(3) *Crisis communication as a technological showcase.* The technology showcase perspective emphasizes the application of communications technologies, usually advanced technologies, for crisis communicating.

The principal instrumental function within the technology showcase lens is to apply communications technology for better crisis communication management. Using the right media to communicate the right information with the right audience is the tenet of this view. Because the Internet serves as an innovational tool for media relations (Taylor & Perry, 2005) Public relations practitioners have utilized the technology to develop and enhance their communicative skills.

(4) *Crisis communication as inter-organizational networking.* This lens focuses on written, oral, and electronic communication among government agencies, stakeholders, and unofficial organizations that are involved in different stages of the crisis.

The above findings and discussion show that public relations practitioners better handle crises because of their expertise in relationship management using various

Babatunde. (2022). Jurnal Bina Praja, 14(3), 543–553

551

media and sound communication techniques. This, no doubt, is most likely to yield the best positive results for crisis communication management.

4. Conclusion

So far, this paper has presented crisis communication management from the holistic approach to all crises. Also, it has explained the importance of identifying the key stakeholders in crisis communication management and the virtual community of social media. Finally, explicate how crises can be well managed through the guidelines and characteristics of crises. By so doing, I strictly believe that this paper has practically contributed to our knowledge of crisis communication by identifying the virtual community that institutionally constitutes the effective public to target and explicating the vital role social media play in crisis communication management as well.

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553