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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- UNDERSTAND YOUR RISKS
- PLAN FOR THE WORST
- EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED
- AVOID COMPLACENCY
- BE READY TO ACT QUICKLY

WHAT HAPPENED?

Events can be great to enjoy but there are a plethora of problems that could happen before, during and after it. Glastonbury 2025 has proved what happens when issues happen and they quickly become a crisis. Before any of the coverage happened, it is important to recognise that the BBC has been under pressure for the way they have managed a series of incidents.

On Saturday, the BBC was streaming many of the artists who performed at the Glastonbury Festival. Bob Vylan were relatively unknown by many who will have watched the coverage but have become the centre of the crisis for the BBC. They used the platform to chant anti-Israel slogans which some in the crowd chanted back. The BBC decided not to pull the livestream and allowed the comments to be broadcast.

The incident and the lack of action by the BBC has become a significant issue, with the police launching a criminal investigation into the Glastonbury performances of both Bob Vylan and Kneecap who also performed on Saturday. Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy claimed there was a problem of leadership at the BBC, UK Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis called it vile, and UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer said it was appalling and also said Kneecap should not have been allowed to play at the festival. One member of Kneecap has been charged with a terrorism offence before the Festival. Later information emerged that BBC Director General Tim Davie had been at Glastonbury and was aware of the incident but did not pull the livestream although it was not made available on demand. In addition, Bob Vylan had US visas revoked before they a tour later this year and their agency dropped them. Four days later the BBC said they would not stream high risk concerts in the future.

What can communication and business learn from the situation?

It was obvious very quickly that the comments and the behaviour was going to cause offense and upset. The backlash started almost immediately as the incident happened. The BBC waited until Monday to provide a statement about the situation.

There was no person who provided the context and explained the statement and it could have been an attempt to avoid prolonging the criticism they were facing. Within the statement they recognised comments were 'deeply offensive' but had to try and tread the fine line between freedom of expression and the incitement to violence that had been made.

In an attempt to provide the context to when and how the live stream happened, it appeared they were trying to justify their lack of swift action to address the situation including detailing that the approach was in line with editorial guidelines. But at the end there is an acceptance that to pull the stream would have been a better decision. It ends with a move to action as the BBC is planning to review the approach to streaming live events.

It was a further three days before Director General Tim Davie made comment and offered to meet Jewish staff. The big challenge for the BBC is further criticism of how they make decisions and a view that they continue to make unacceptable decisions or fail to act. Once again, they are facing the reputational damage from the incident that could have been a risk identified and prepared for in the planning process.

What do we need to remember in this situation?

- Understand your risks as part of event planning – with the challenging external environment the BBC faced not just internal risks to the operation of the streaming, but issues outside their control. We cannot always prevent incidents happening but we can know where our risks are so we can plan and prepare.
- Expect the unexpected – the BBC may have become focused on Kneecap as being an artist likely to cause controversy that they took their eye off the possibility that others could step into that space. When preparing for a crisis, push your thinking to avoid focusing on the same issues year after year.
- Plan for the worst – it is not something many people enjoy as the focus needs to be on everyone enjoying events. But planning for the worst is essential if you are going to be able to respond effectively and act quickly.
- Be ready to take swift action – artists will always be on the edge of sparking controversy so having a mechanism to take the livestream down and to communicate why this has been done should have been at the heart of the planning process.
- Avoid becoming complacent – just because you have run that event for years, or because you have never had an issue with that area of business doesn't mean it will never happen. Problems can happen in all aspects of life.
- Recognise the impact your reputation can have – if people have a low opinion of you based on poor responses to previous issues, don't expect them to be positive when you act now. Building a positive reputation provides a strong foundation for the crisis response.
- It isn't over when the furore ends – for the BBC there is a long term issue of building back trust and confidence, not just from the public but from key stakeholders. The comments from the Government have shown how the cumulative effects of critical incidents need them to take some positive action. It is time to consider how to rebuild and repair the damage to its reputation.

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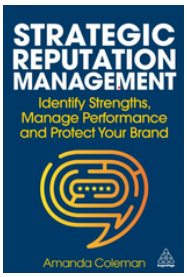

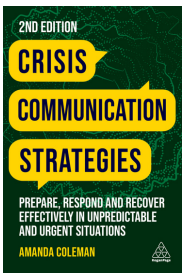

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