

Navigating Social Media Firestorms: Towards A Firestorm Radar

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Abstract

A social media firestorm (SMF) is a sudden and intense surge of negative reactions, criticism, or controversy on social media platforms, often triggered by a specific event, statement, or action. These firestorms can significantly impact individuals, organisations, or brands, leading to reputational damage, financial loss, or other adverse consequences if not managed effectively. This paper elaborates on an SMF scale inspired by the Saffir-Simpson hurricane scale, adopting a structured approach to SMF measurement and management. Specifically, it explores the corporate application of the scale, as a means of measuring “digital hurricanes” targeting individuals, corporations, or products. The SMF scale defines three measurable dimensions: width (the reach or scope of the firestorm), height (the intensity or volume of negative sentiment), and the shark-fin shape formed by the peak of negative sentiment. These dimensions offer a systematic framework for assessing the scale and potential impact of a firestorm. Furthermore, the scale accounts for the context of the triggering event, categorising topics such as personal scandals, product failures, corporate crises, or global controversies. The findings establish an initial process for preparing for SMFs and introduce the concept of a “firestorm radar” to predict and mitigate impacts. Validation of the SMF scale is achieved through artificial intelligence techniques to support corporate procedure development and implementation, with crowdsourcing proposed to gather comprehensive firestorm data. These insights highlight how understanding the mechanisms of SMFs can help managers develop effective crisis management strategies, mitigate risks, and foster resilience against the growing threat of digital firestorms.

Keywords: Social media firestorm, digital hurricane, reputational damage, social media, media sentiment, scandal, predictive tool