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Negotiating crisis in the new media environment: Evolution of crises online, gaining legitimacy offline

Augustine PANG
Singapore Management University, augustine@smu.edu.sg

Nasrath Begam Binte Abul Hassan
Nanyang Technological University

Aaron Chee Yang CHONG
Nanyang Technological University

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Negotiating Crisis in the New Media Environment

Evolution of Crises Online, Gaining Legitimacy Offline

Augustine Pang, Nasrath Begam Binte Abul Hassan & Aaron Chee-Yang Chong
Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
augustine.pang@ntu.edu.sg, nasrathb@gmail.com & aaronccy@gmail.com

This study examines how crises originate online, how different new media platforms escalate crises, and how issues become legitimized offline when they transit onto mainstream media. We study five social media crises, which includes United breaks guitars and Southwest Air's too fat to fly. Crises are triggered online when stakeholders are empowered by new media platforms that allow user-generated content to be posted online without any filtering. Facebook, YouTube and Twitter emerge as top crises breeding grounds due to their large user base and the lack of gatekeeping. Facebook and blogs are responsible for escalating crises beyond the immediate stakeholder groups. Mainstream media, legitimizes issues offline when there are inherent news values like, human-interest, policy-making, celebrity or novelty factors present. This study suggests recommendations to manage reputational impact on organizations and instruct practitioners on how they can use different new media tools to counter crises online and manage the transition of crises to mainstream media.

The advent of new media technology and social media platforms are transforming how organizations communicate with stakeholders (Christ, 2007). According to White and Raman (1999) the World Wide Web is arguably the first mass medium which allows uninterrupted flow of information from source to receiver without any gatekeeping or filtering. However, as Siah, Bansal, and Pang (2010) noted, new media is a "double-edged sword" (p.143). While it can be an effective crisis management tool (DiNardo, 2002; Greer & Moreland, 2003; Hagar & Haythornthwaite, 2005; Hughes, Palen, Sutton, Liu, & Vieweg, 2008; Palen, Vieweg, Liu, & Hughes, 2009), new media can also trigger new crises.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and niche online community chatrooms are becoming potential breeding grounds for organizational crises. In the last ten years, incidences of online crises reaching mainstream media have seen a ten-fold increase (Owyang, Jones, Tran, & Nguyen, 2011). The speed at which things are evolving on the Internet is unnerving. McGrath (1997) equates one year on the Internet to seven years in any other medium. The rapid evolution of new media technology and the expeditious transition to Web 2.0 has resulted in the practice of public relations and crisis communication moving beyond research (Coombs, 2008).

To effectively negotiate crises on new media, communication practitioners need to understand how crises are triggered online, how crises are escalated within the new media environment and how crises gain legitimacy offline through mainstream media coverage. By analyzing the transition of crises from online to mainstream media, practitioners can better respond with effective new media crisis management strategies.

This paper examines case studies of crises that originated online, gained momentum on social media platforms before transiting onto mainstream media. This research analyzes how crises are triggered and get aggravated online and how the crises are legitimized by mainstream media. By analyzing five crises' life cycles and how they were managed, this study identifies trends and potentially mitigating measures to help practitioners negotiate crisis situations both online and offline.

The significance of this paper is threefold. This is one of the first few studies that analyses how organizational crises originate online, gain traction and get escalated onto mainstream media. This will enhance understanding of crisis development online and useful in anticipating and planning effective pre-emptive new media crisis communication and response strategies. This study also identifies compelling new media elements that gain the attention of mainstream media. Understanding what causes crises to trigger online and gain legitimacy offline will enable practitioners to engage in effective crisis management strategies.

Literature Review

Emergence of social media and crisis escalation in new media

New media technologies share at least three defining features: They are digital, converging, and networked. Because its digitalized, multimedia information can easily be shared, accessed, and interfaced with other "smart" devices and users, which enables the public to interconnect regardless of geographical boundaries or time zones (Goggin & Newell, 2003). User-generated content leads to increased consumer participation and facilitates the free flow of opinions and the sharing of experiences online. As more consumers choose to connect, network, and collaborate with each other on social media platforms, they are able to enjoy a "more accurate, timely, and relevant customer experience without organizations disrupting the flow of influence" (Wang & Owyang, 2010).

Unwittingly, new media has leveled the playing field by shifting the command controls of communication from companies to consumers (Shapiro, 1999). Information and conversations online are no longer controlled top-down by governments, mainstream media, and organisations (Wheeler, 2001). Individuals empowered by social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, and blogs are able to take on giant corporations quite successfully (Bernoff & Li, 2008). "Netizens", "citizen journalists", and social media influencers are emerging as important stakeholders whom practitioners need to engage (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011).

In Siah et al.'s (2010) study, the authors found that the very characteristics that make new media unique, such as user interactivity, multimedia capability and lack of gatekeeping are "also its Achilles heel" (p. 143). The internet allows news to travel to a wider audience at a faster rate compared to traditional media. New media offers alternative sources of news and information, especially during crises when organizations may not release information fast. This also leads to the spread of inaccurate information, spoofs and "spin-offs" that indent reputations (Ho, Auyong, Dong, Lau, & Pang, 2011; J. Siah, et al., 2010).

Current approaches to managing new media crises

Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith's (2008) four-stage crisis management model provides a framework to combat online threats. This model extrapolates potential online threats on a crisis life cycle from issues management and strategic planning to crisis communication and post-crisis management. This model enables practitioners to approach online crisis management as a holistic process rather than a one-off damage control procedure (Siah, Bansal, & Pang, 2010).

By integrating Gonzalez-Herro & Smith's model and the contingency theory of strategic conflict management, Siah et al (2010) developed the new media crisis communication model to mitigate threats posed by new media. By identifying the predisposing and situational variables

that may affect an organisation's stance during the entire crisis life cycle, this model offers recommendations that practitioners could consider enforcing.

While the two models offer suggestions on how to handle online crises, there is little clarity on how crises are triggered online and exacerbated within the new media environment. These approaches also do not address the challenges posed by individual new media platforms during crises and how crises gain traction and legitimacy offline. These approaches also do not address the transition of the crises from new media to mainstream media and the specific factors that cause the transition.

Transition of new media to mainstream media

Past research shows that the Internet has shifted the relationship between journalists and news consumers from a one-way, asymmetric model of communication to a more participatory and collective system (Boczkowski, 2004; Deuze, 2003). Beckett & Mansell (2008) describe journalism in the age of new media as one that relies heavily on new media technology, an unforgiving 24/7 news cycle and interactive. The news-gathering process has also shifted from a linear to a networked process whereby there is constant communication and interaction with sources and reactors. Jenkins (2006) describes the emergence of a participatory culture in journalism as one that is in contrast with traditional notions of passive media consumption. Content producers and media audiences have moved from occupying distinct separate roles to being "participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us [yet] fully understand" (Jenkins, 2006).

The advent of new media has also changed the role of the journalist. Traditionally, journalists filter, organize, and interpret information and deliver the news in ready-made, easy to consume packages. This was possible in an environment where access to media production was limited and restricted. With the floodgates open in cyberspace, news comes in various forms such as Twitter updates, Facebook posts and blogs. With the barrage of news coming from all directions, it is impossible for media organizations to analyze the collective sum of knowledge contained in these micro-fragments and bring reasonable meaning to the data (Hermida, 2010).

Skoler (2009) points out that the value of social media is in its ability to create the spirit of sharing, and journalists who operate in this new environment will benefit by using social media platforms to "establish relationship[s] and listen to others". Increasingly, journalists too realize the importance of creating a new media presence for themselves and their news entities. In a study conducted on Facebook, it was found that thousands of journalists have enabled the "subscribe" function, with journalists from prominent news organizations like *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* leading the way (Vadim & Betsy, 2012).

Mainstream media has also begun emphasizing content that is sourced from social media platforms to show that it is keeping up with the times, and rightly so. During the Iranian street protests that followed elections there in 2009, Newman (2009) observed that mainstream media such as the New York Times, the Guardian, CNN, and the Huffington Post emphasized information that emerged from social media and monitored the flurry of activities on Twitter, Facebook, and the blogosphere. Dramatic footage from all over the country was uploaded to video-sharing websites and it was reported that CNN and the BBC, at one stage were receiving up to five videos a minute (Newman, 2009).

News media coverage of issues that are discussed on social media platforms is also exacerbated by media hype, a concept that Vasterman (2005) posits. Media hype is defined as a "media generated, wall-to-wall news wave, triggered by one specific event and enlarged by the self-reinforcing processes within the news production of the media" (Vasterman, 2005, p. 515).

When issues trend over social media platforms, they trigger interest among mainstream media producers to analyze and evaluate if these warrant discussion and debate in the bigger public sphere. As Vasterman argues, increased media attention reinforces and amplifies news waves and lead to "an expansion of the definition of the problem" (p. 517) where issues get broadened and unfortunately amplified.

However, it should be rightly noted that social media content does not always set the news agenda and if issues do transit onto mainstream media, it is never covered with the same fervor or regularity. In a study conducted by Silver (2010) on the Occupy Wall Street protests, it was found that while social media space had accorded consistent coverage throughout the duration of the protests, most mainstream media outlets, in fact, ignored the event. It was only after the protestors clashed with the police that coverage intensified (Silver, 2011). A study conducted by Pew Research Centre's Project for Excellence in Journalism examined how mainstream media organizations utilized their social media channels to seek out stories. Results showed that only 2% of tweets from news consumers were used to attain information regarding a story or gain feedback (Holcomb & Mitchell, 2011).

While mainstream media continues to monitor and cover content from social media platforms, coverage is still largely dependent on the proscribed set of journalistic values and practitioners and scholars continue to debate how this may evolve in view of the growing affluence of Web 2.0. The Internet has empowered audiences by providing them with new and additional sources of information. This marks changing times for mainstream journalism as social media platforms continue to expand their influence (Kiesow, 2010; Skoler, 2009; Sonderman, 2012).

If new media platforms escalate organizational crises, this study seeks to examine the following questions with the specific crises:

RQ1: How do organizational crises originate online? Which new media platforms were responsible for triggering the crises?

RQ2: What other new media platforms were responsible for escalating the crises beyond the immediate stakeholder groups?

RQ3: How long did it take for the crises to get the attention of the mainstream media? How long were the crises covered by the mainstream media? How did the mainstream media cover the crises differently from new media?

RQ4: What was the subsequent impact to the image of the organizations/ individuals involved? Were any enduring images formed? How did the organizations respond to the crises?

RQ5: How can organizations respond to crises that originate and escalate online?

Method

We employed the multiple case study method as this approach offers the collation of rich data to allow detailed documentation of a relatively new phenomenon and a certain degree of generalization. Since multiple case studies tend to replicate and produce similar results (Siah, et al., 2010; Yin, 2009), as argues, this approach allows the capturing of the essential processes of decision making, implementation, and change (Gummesson, 2000).

We selected five crises case studies that were triggered online and gained legitimacy offline through mainstream media.

The cases

1) *Dell Hell (2005).* In June 2005, popular blogger Jeff Jarvis posted a series of rants on his weblog at Buzzmachine.com where he complained about Dell's poor customer service. His "Dell Hell" postings sparked off similar rants and blog posts from similarly affected customers. At the height of the crisis, searching "Dell hell" in Google returned more than 2.4 million results, and "Dell sucks" returned almost 1.3 million results.

2) *Dirty Domino's (2009).* Two Domino's Pizza employees uploaded a video on YouTube showing them assembling sandwiches in the most unhygienic manner before delivering them to customers. The video went viral and was viewed more than a million times within a few days and caused Domino's massive reputation damage.

3) *United breaks guitars (2009).* United Airlines passenger Dave Carroll had his Taylor guitar destroyed by the airline's baggage handlers during a flight. After United Airlines repeatedly declined to reimburse him for the damage, he wrote a now-famous song decrying their customer service which ultimately dented its sales figures.

4) *Southwest Air's too fat to fly (2010*). Southwest Air's "customer of size" policy received a high-profile roasting when the airline targeted Hollywood director Kevin Smith. In response, he sent a series of exasperated Tweets claiming that he was kicked off a flight for being "too fat".

5) *Grace Fu – "When I made the decision…"(2012).* In response to an ongoing debate over ministerial pay, Grace Fu, a Singapore politician, expressed her concerns over salary reduction on her Facebook page. Her post became viral and sparked criticism among netizens. Thousands of people reposted the post, creating an Internet meme that began with "When I made the decision to…"

Data Collection and Analysis

Following the case study selection, we collected and analyzed three sets of data. Drawing insights from Siah et al.'s (2010) study on the escalation of crises through new media, this study similarly used the qualitative method of analysis to track the life cycle of each crisis, the transition onto mainstream media and organizational responses.

Data Set 1: Internet documents such as blog postings, Facebook comments, Twitter updates, and YouTube videos were searched online.
        Documentation by journalists, commentators, and bloggers online with screen shots of the original Twitter and Facebook posts were available for analysis. This set of data was used to track the life cycle of the crises; i.e the trigger event, public reaction, transition to mainstream media and back. The overall tone of postings and updates on social media helped to gauge public sentiments.

Data Set 2: News reports from major news publications and news agencies sourced from the Factiva database.

News sources were limited to English-language newspapers, and the duration limited to a period of six months after the first news article was published. The objective was to track the follow-up coverage and other related news after the crisis subsided. This data was used to analyze mainstream media coverage of the crises. The data was categorized into prominent news elements, the portrayal of the affected parties and how much info was taken of online by the mainstream.

Data Set 3: Online posts, press announcements and documents that originated from the organization or individuals involved.

Organizational response was used to analyze the actions and stances taken by the organizations and individuals involved in the crises. Both online and offline documents – that is, what was discussed on social media platforms and the mainstream media – were reviewed to better understand the organizational constraints and the effects of the crises communication strategies.

Findings and Discussion

RQ1 examines how organizational crises originated online and which new media platforms were responsible in triggering the crises.

In Case 1 (Dell Hell), Jarvis' first post on 21 June 2005 received about 250 comments, all of which were written by other consumers who had been on the receiving end of Dell's customer service. His third post started with: "Well my Dell hell continues….", which made the term "Dell Hell" synonymous with Jarvis' encounter with Dell (Jarvis, 2005b). His subsequent posts about his exchanges with Dell received hundreds of responses, and averaged between 200 and 400 comments per post. On 11 July 2005, Jarvis posted his final Dell Hell rant (Jarvis, 2005a). However, discussion about Dell's poor customer service had been ignited and online conversations continued throughout the summer of 2005 when mainstream media published the story.

In Case 2 (Dirty Domino's), two rogue workers at a Domino's Pizza unit – Kristy Lynn Hammonds and Michael Anthony Setzer – in North Carolina filmed themselves putting cheese in their nose and other stomach-turning acts with food that were to be delivered to customers, and then posted it to YouTube in April 2009 (NBC New York, 2009). In a single day after the video was uploaded, the video went viral and received 760,000 views (Advertising Age, 2009). Although the original video was removed after a few days, reproductions of the video are still circulating on the internet.

For the United breaks Guitars case, the crisis was triggered when a song depicting United Airlines' poor customer service was uploaded on YouTube. The spoof music video garnered more than three million hits in ten days (Mashable Business, 2009). The song "United Breaks Guitars" went on to be one of 2009's YouTube hits and has garnered more than seven million hits even after the crisis blew over (Social Media Risk, 2010).

In the case of Southwest Airlines' customer of size policy, the crisis started when Hollywood movie producer Kevin Smith decided to fly on a standby flight on Southwest Air and was send off the flight as he did not fulfill the policy where passengers who cannot fit safely and comfortably in one seat with armrests down, must purchase an additional seat (ABC News, 2010). After being sent off the plane, Smith went on a rampage of tweets about his negative experience to his more than 1.6 million followers on his twitter account (Economist, 2010).

In the case of Singapore politician, Grace Fu's Facebook comment, the crisis was triggered when she posted her opinion regarding the revision to ministerial pay online (Hoe, 2012). Her Facebook posting drew instant criticism online and went viral as netizens started sharing and commenting on the posting on Facebook, blogs and microblog sites (2012).

What we can infer from these cases:

- The crises were triggered and escalated by new media's power to reach a large population within a short span of time (Siah, et al., 2010).
- Social media platforms that connect large groups of people, such as Twitter and Facebook, enabled messages and content to pass on and shared within a very short span of time.
- All social media platforms that enables the sharing of user-generated content i.e. YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and blogs have the capacity and following to create organizational crises.
- Video content tend to have a higher and faster reach compared to text-based postings and updates. For instance, the Domino's video and United Breaks Guitars videos were viewed and shared by far more people within a short span of time compared to the other cases.

RQ2 examined what other new media platforms were responsible for the escalation of the crises beyond the immediate stakeholder groups.

In Dell Hell's case, the crisis was mainly escalated through Jarvis' blog, Buzzmachine.com, which received a substantial number of responses from fellow customers and bloggers. At one point, Jarvis' blog was receiving about 10,000 visits a day (Leonard, 2006). This crisis was mainly discussed in the blogosphere because in 2005, other social media platforms were not as widely popular as today's Facebook and Twitter.

In the Dirty Domino's case, video went viral via YouTube, Twitter, Blogs, and Facebook. Even though the original video was removed, numerous reproductions have been made and were still circulating years after the incident happened (ebonygentleman79, 2009). Social networking platforms such as Twitter and Facebook were instrumental in spreading the word about the video beyond the initial YouTube audience and aggravating the crisis. After the Domino's Pizza YouTube video went viral, numerous reproductions of the same video made by both individuals and news organizations were uploaded on YouTube, adding to the search list under the term "Dirty Dominoes".

Similar to the Domino's case, the crisis faced by United Airlines was made worse when the offending video went viral through the YouTube platform. Dave Caroll's video for the song "United Breaks Guitars"' was posted on the popular file-sharing site Monday night and had received more than 600,000 hits by Thursday evening (Mashable, 2009). He also received thousands of emails and a flood of friend requests on Facebook that boosted his popularity online and offline.

In the Southwest Airlines case, the crisis was aggravated by the fact that Kevin Smith had quick access to more than 1.6 million cyberspace users who were following his Twitter updates and so his negative experience was broadcasted to this large group within a very short period of time. Also Facebook comments, postings and links to Smith's tweets further aggravated the crisis by spreading the word beyond his fan base instigated debate on the blogosphere regarding the "customer of size" policy (McEwan, 2010).

In Grace Fu's case, within a single day, her posting drew more than a thousand comments on her facebook account – mainly criticisms. A dedicated microblog site was created on Tumblr

http://whenimadethedecision.tumblr.com/ to post the best memes, where the term "Fu-isms" was coined. Her status update was also reposted by several prominent bloggers.

What we can infer:

- Facebook is a prominent social media platform that is responsible for spreading the incriminatory videos and posts beyond the immediate stakeholder groups.
- Facebook also amplifies the crises by popularizing the issue and the "underdogs".
- Likewise, Facebook also creates a platform for users to criticize organizations and individuals openly.
- Facebook's popularity and reach makes this social media platform one that organizations should monitor closely.
- Twitter also serves a large member base because posts and links can be easily shared via its microblog platform. Twitter users are able to post simultaneously on Facebook at the same time, multiplying their reach.
- Dell was spared from this phenomenon mainly because, in 2005, Facebook was still a newly launched platform and did not have a huge member base and Twitter was not yet developed.
- Blogs too escalate crises by providing additional content through opinion pieces, longer comments, and links to relevant websites. The blogs gain prominence mainly due to the celebrity status of the bloggers and their followers.
- Most bloggers and their followers also have Facebook and Twitter accounts and create links to blog posts via these platforms. Once posts are made on Facebook and Twitter, more people see the blog articles and the crisis gets amplified and gains more leverage.

RQ3 analyzes the transition of the crises from new media to the mainstream media and the time lag between the crises breaking out and mainstream media reporting on it.

In the Dell Hell case, the mainstream media generally picked up on the crises only a month after Jarvis posted his first rant (CMP Techweb, 2005). There were some earlier online media reports smaller, online web news portals that mainly linked bloggers (Jarvis, 2005a). About three weeks after Jarvis's first Dell rant, it was reported that Dell had shut down its customer care board on its community forum (CMP TechWeb, 2005). Another incident that interested the mainstream media was Jarvis's email to one of Dell's senior executives and his open letter dated 17 August to Michael Dell and Dell CMO Michael George, in which he lamented their lack of response and offered suggestions on how Dell could better interact with bloggers. Mainstream media, including *BusinessWeek, Fast Company*, *ZDNet*, *PC World*, and the *Houston Chronicle*, picked up on this story.

In the Dirty Domino's case, the offending video was uploaded and went viral on April 13 2009. An official response from Domino's was released a day after on its official website on 14 April 2009 (swifttallon, 2009). However, the mainstream media only started reporting on the incident on 15 April 2009 after the two employees were fired and charges were officially filed (Crowe, 2009). The mainstream media's coverage focused on the charges that were filed against the two errant employees and their respective backgrounds, not the discriminatory video. Coverage also focused on one of the offenders being a former registered sex offender. Subsequent follow-up news coverage focused more on issues such as the recruitment policies of organizations and the general impact of social media.

In the United Airlines case, the music video was first uploaded onto YouTube on 6 July 2009, while the first news report in the mainstream media appeared on 9 July 2009, three days

after the video was uploaded. The coverage in the mainstream media focused primarily on the unprecedented success of the video and exploited the human interest element of using music to get messages across.

In the Southwest Air's case, mainstream media covered the story a day after Smith's twitter updates (ABC News, 2010). The mainstream media focused largely on the personality involved. It also discussed the validity of the existing flight policy. The coverage tapered off after two weeks, but references to the Kevin Smith case continued to be made in reports regardingsimilar incidents.

In the Grace Fu case, Fu's original Facebook post was posted at 9:41pm on 4 Jan 2012. She clarified her comments about 20 hours later at 5.15pm on 5 Jan 2012 (Wong, 2012). Following the online furor from her first post, the mainstream media covered the event first as a side comment on 5 Jan 2012 with the ministerial pay issue, and then covered the online comments that were made on 6 Jan 2012 as an individual report. While the mainstream media's coverage of this crisis died down after first two days, subsequent commentaries – online and offline - published regarding the ministerial pay issues and never failed to mention the Grace Fu episode. By 15 January, there were no new headlines on the criticism, but the criticism continued online, albeit without the original gusto.

What we can infer and recommend:

- Traditional news values, such as novelty (United Breaks Guitars), celebrity factor (Kevin Smith's Too fat to fly), impact on society at large (Grace Fu), human interest (Dell Hell), relevance to public (Domino's) and regulations (Domino's), continue to guide mainstream media coverage.
- Mainstream media is more objective and balanced in reporting as organizations and the individuals involved are given space to state their positions clearly.
- Mainstream media, as an agenda setter, presented public issues of concern for public debate – food safety and employment guidelines (Domino's), ministerial salary review (Grace Fu), consumer protection (United breaks guitars and Dell Hell) and discrimination (Too Fat to Fly).
- Organizations should track potential "explosive" issues and manage them effectively before the mainstream media amplifies the crises.

RQ4 examines how organizations/individuals responded to the new media crises and the subsequent impact to the image of the organizations and if any sort of enduring images were formed.

In Dell Hell, the company remained silent throughout Jarvis' rants. Dell's company policy was to observe what goes but take a hands-off approach in regards to the Internet. Experts commented that Dell did not take blogging seriously then because it considered the blogosphere to be a fairly new medium. This further outraged the bloggers because they claimed that Dell was not "listening" to the conversation online or reacting to customers' dissatisfaction. About two months after Jarvis' first rant, a Dell public relations representative called Jarvis to talk about his Dell experience and company policies, but fail to engage unhappy customers online whether sentiments were not favorable. As a result, Dell's sales and reputation began to plummet. However, now, 7 years later, Dell has emerged as one of the pioneers of online engagement. The enduring image here is the term Dell Hell. This incident has become a classic example to quote and take cues from when analyzing the impact of new media on businesses.

In the Domino's case, the company responded to the video about 48 hours later. The videos were posted on Monday night; a response didn't come from the company until

Wednesday. While its internal team worked quickly to form a strategy on Tuesday, its initial response was to try not to unnecessarily draw attention to the video because it didn't want to alert more people to the scandal. It did eventually open a Twitter account to deal with consumer inquiries and then made an apology through YouTube. However the damage was already done. In a research conducted later found that 65% of respondents who would previously visit or order Domino's Pizza were less likely to do so after viewing the offending video (Flandez, 2009).

In the United Airlines case, the company initially chose to ignore Carroll's claim to replace his broken guitar, but, just two days after the video was posted and went viral, they offered to compensate him for it. In terms of reputational impact, the video was viewed by more than 6 million people by the end of 2009 and currently has more than 11 million views. This means that the negative associations to United Airlines continue to grow on the social media platforms.

Southwest Airlines issued an apology to Kevin Smith via Twitter and its website, which was titled "Not So Silent Bob", a jovial jab at the Silent Bob character that Smith played in his films. The statement read: "We would like to echo our tweets and again offer our heartfelt apologies to you… Our pilots... made the determination that Mr. Smith needed more than one seat to complete the flight" (McNeill, 2010). The apology added that the company offered the director a $100 voucher and that it would accommodate him on a later flight. Compared to the rest of the crises the reputation damage was marginal as the crisis evolved around an existing policy which Smith was very well aware and familiar with as he had experience purchasing two seats to travel.

In the Grace Fu case, the online furor over the original post led Fu to clarify her views:

Thank you all for your candid views. I respect all of them. I realise my last posting could have been misunderstood. The committee has done a thorough job with a substantial recommendation over a fairly emotive topic. I accept and respect the recommendation (Wong, 2012).

Aside from the clarification made on Facebook, Fu did not make any further responses. What we can infer and recommend:

- The offending content had some level of permanence on new media platforms. Discriminating content is usually shared, copied, or imitated online, which makes it difficult to permanently remove the content.
- Search lists are immediately formed using key terms associated with the crises that enable easy search of the discriminatory contents.
- Reputation damage is largely dependent on the cause of the trigger event. In the "United breaks Guitars" and Dell Hell cases, customer dissatisfaction was an inherent problem and so the discriminatory postings were a point of engagement for other disgruntled customers and potential customers. Therefore the damage to business was more acute.
- For the case of "Too fat to fly", it was an existing policy that was enforced by all airlines, so other than the celebrity factor which triggered of discussions regarding discrimination and flight safety, the airlines did not suffer substantial reputation damage.
- Organizations should consider taking counter actions by strategically producing official responses to be posted on the same new media platform to counteract and balance the impact to organizational reputation i.e. Domino's posting apology on YouTube, Southwest Air's tweet and Grace Fu's Facebook update. These actions will

also reach the primary audience who viewed and reacted to the discriminatory postings effectively.

RQ5 examines how organizations can prepare and respond to crises that originate and escalate online.

Based on the findings, the authors would like to make the following recommendations.

1. Identify the stakeholders, opinion leaders, and relevant social media platforms

It is important for organizations to embark on social media initiatives with clear objectives. Organizations need to identify key stakeholders and opinion leaders online, and locate the social media platforms where their consumers congregate. For instance, airlines need to be well informed about popular travel bloggers and travel networks where experiences and reviews regarding service, price, and experiences are shared. Understanding key social media influencers (SMIs) is also becoming increasingly crucial for corporations. SMIs "represent a new type of independent third party endorsements that can shape audience attitudes through new media (Freberg, et al., 2011). When organizations know where to look for key opinion leaders and the bulk of consumers, they will be better able to track conversations and that may, if overlooked, become a potential crisis.

2. Have a strong social media presence and engage in dialogue

Given the pervasiveness of social media in today's context, organizations must participate and have an effective social media presence in order to effectively pre-empt and respond to potential crises that could arise from the social media platforms. Research conducted by Siah and colleagues (2009) and Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith (2008) point out the importance of identifying and tracking potentially contentious issues that are raised online early. While many organizations may already have a social media presence, few effectively use the tools that are available to them. As Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith (2008) rightfully noted, in the age of the Internet, "audiences are demanding high responsiveness, transparency and authenticity from companies and those that fail to deliver it quickly leave themselves vulnerable to attack" (p. 152). Organizations must, therefore, understand they should not only use social media to deliver information but also leverage on new media engage in their stakeholders effectively.

3. Track issues and devise response strategies – online and offline

Besides having an online presence, organizations should track potential issues that may arise from the social media platforms. In drawing up the model to manage crisis communications on the internet, Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith (2008) note that organizations should prepare for any possible crisis and plan for potential scenarios that require organizations to monitor the environment i.e., not just in search of warning signs but also prepare for a possible negative impact of an issue. From the Dell and Grace Fu's case, we can infer that organizations should be more sensitive to the potential negative sentiments that stakeholders may have. By using social media as a platform to monitor potential negative sentiments, organizations should determine suitable response strategies. Timely intervention will help organizations to minimize the impact of the crisis and may even prevent the issue from escalating onto the mainstream media. By tracking and analyzing the issues that are being discussed on social media platforms, organizations can intervene and address these underlying issues early. This would also ensure that organizations could devise suitable strategic responses to address these concerns appropriately even if the issues eventually attract the attention of the mainstream media.

4. Pre-empt crisis by responding before crisis escalates

With an effective social media presence and issue-tracking platform, organizations may still be unable to prevent an issue from escalating. Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith (2008) argue that, for most issues on the Internet to develop into serious crises, they still need to be picked up by the mainstream media (p. 149). However, organizations can also use the same tools that people use to escalate crises to respond. For example, a timely response strategy could mitigate possible issues and prevent them from escalating into the mainstream media. However, even if the issue escalates into the mainstream media, the coverage will be balanced and not skewed against the organization as compared to a one-sided narrative that occurs when organizations choose to respond after the crisis or to not respond at all.

5. Generate news to reduce permanence of crisis

Even after mainstream media loses interest in a crisis, conversations do continue online, albeit without the same fervor or hostility. To make offending materials on cyberspace less easily available to netizens, organizations should strategically generate news and web links which will counter produce a new list of results when people key in once-discriminatory terms on search engine. Organizations can creatively manipulate key search terms that were widely used in a crisis and generate positive news reports, blog postings or articles and reduce reputational damage in the long run.

Conclusion

From examining all the case studies, we observe that traditional news values still continue to guide news coverage in the mainstream media. Conventional news values such as celebrity factor ("Too fat to fly" - Kevin Smith, Hollywood producer, Grace Fu – politician), human interest and conflict (Domino's Pizza) policies (Dominos Pizza – employment policies, "Too fat to fly" – customer of size policy), novelty ("United Breaks Guitar" – endearing music video) and massive customer dissatisfaction (Dell Hell and "United Breaks Guitars".

The mainstream media is more objective in its coverage as it takes a balanced stance in its reports compared to postings online. Serving its function as an agenda setter, the mainstream media presented possible public issues for discussion and deliberation as a result of the crisis trigger event. Often the trigger events are in themselves insignificant compared to the bigger issue at play. If the issue is one of significant public interest, any related social media crisis will serve to present it to the public consciousness. This means that organizations may want to track online sentiments towards thorny organizational issues on cyberspace and social media platforms more closely because these sentiments – when presented and escalated through the social media – are more likely to be potential trigger points for crises when amplified by mainstream media.

While new media has empowered stakeholders with new tools and platforms to air their grievances, these incidences will transit onto mainstream media only if they are able to fulfill the inherent newsworthiness criteria of the newsroom. For example, if one is able to galvanize the support of an extraordinary number of people in a short time through new media, it increases the possibility of mainstream media taking note. Therefore, organizations that wish to manage online crisis preemptively should closely monitor online activities to understand whether any underlying issues are developing in cyberspace. Such management should not be just limited to how organizations cope with information in the new media and their day-to-day business operations. If we use the "United Breaks Guitars" case as an illustration, the video would not have gone viral if United had been more responsive to Dave Carroll's request.

This study explored how organizational crises are triggered online, which social media platforms are responsible for crises to be triggered and escalated onto mainstream media and organizational responses to new media triggered crisis. Although this paper only looks at five case studies and findings may not be generalized, it sheds light on how organizations can manage and pre-empt crises that trigger online.

Further research could examine specific social media platforms and analyze crisis trigger factors peculiar to these platforms and how organizations can counter them. Additional research could also explore the existing new media communication strategies adopted by organizations and assess their effectiveness in today's Web 2.0.

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