

FIGHTING THE SOCIAL MEDIA WILDFIRE: HOW CRISIS COMMUNICATION
MUST ADAPT TO PREVENT FROM FANNING THE FLAMES

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ABSTRACT

Allison R. Soule: Fighting the Social Media Wildfire: How Crisis Communication Must Adapt to Prevent from Fanning the Flames

(Under the direction of Dr. Lois Boynton)

When a nine-month correspondence seeking reparations for musical instruments damaged by United Airlines employees stalemated, Canadian musician Dave Carroll took action online. Utilizing the video-sharing Web site YouTube, Carroll narrated his ordeal through the lyrics of a music video entitled United Breaks Guitars. Within hours, the video went viral generating a torrent of negative YouTube comments about United, commentary from the mainstream media, and more than 3 million views the first week of its launch. United Breaks Guitars embodies the new phenomenon of a social media wildfire in which the rapid proliferation of information through social media causes severe reputational damage to organizations whose crisis communication plans are ill equipped to handle online dilemmas. Using symbolic interactionist theory, this case analysis explores the phenomenon in detail and provides suggestions for how organizations must re-evaluate existing crisis communication plans to respond effectively to an online audience in the billions.

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Chapter I: Introduction and Problem

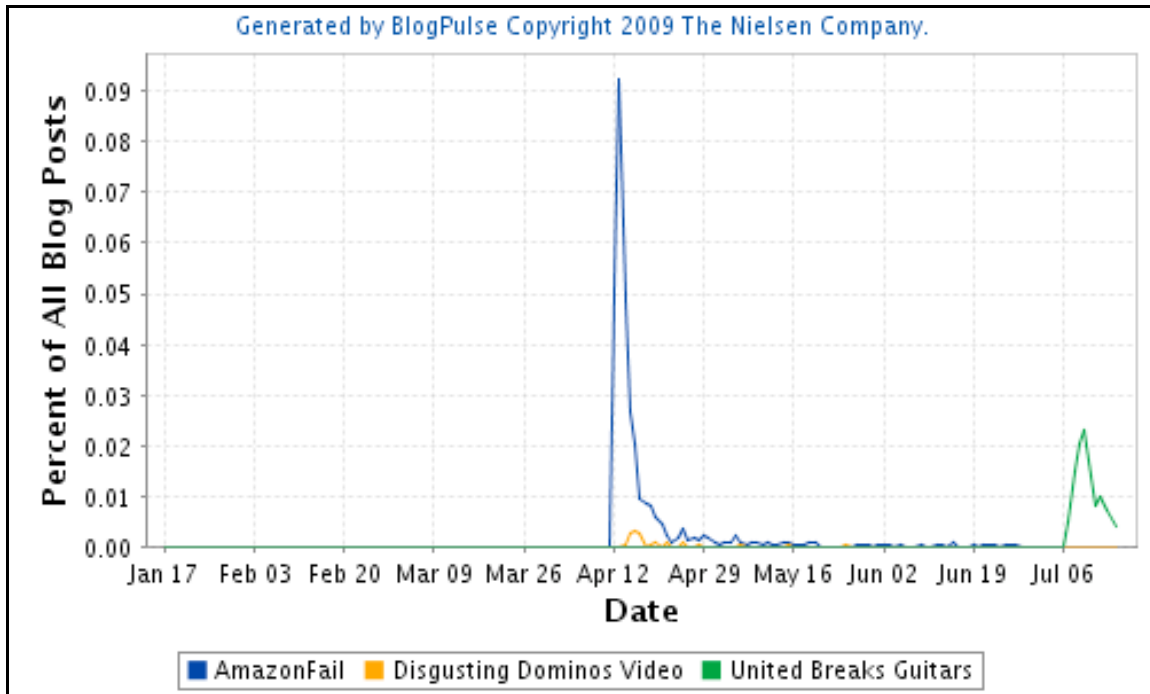
When taking inventory of the possible public relations catastrophes that could mar an airline's reputation, a single piece of damaged luggage would probably not be considered. However, that seemingly outlandish possibility became a reality for United Airlines (UA) in 2009. When a nine-month correspondence seeking reparations for his guitar damaged by baggage handlers ended, musician Dave Carroll wrote a song, produced a video narrating his ordeal, and uploaded it to the popular video-sharing Web site YouTube. Within hours, the video went viral, generating a torrent of negative YouTube comments about United (Reynolds, 2009), commentary from the mainstream media, and more than 3 million views the first week of its launch (Hammond, 2009). The result was a social media wildfire that spread among different channels for hours before United acknowledged its transgression publicly. Further, it did so cryptically on the microblogging Web site Twitter, without mentioning Carroll specifically, and only in response to another user: "This has struck a chord w/ us and we've contacted him directly to make it right" (UnitedAirlines, 2009).

According to Nielsen Online, Carroll's video was one of the most hotly discussed topics in the blogosphere, ranking below an Amazon.com cataloging error affecting many homosexual books¹ (Rich, 2009) and above the YouTube video of Domino's Pizza

¹ In April 2009, the author of a homosexual novel noticed that queries for similar, same-sex titles were not appearing in searches on Amazon.com's Web site and wrote about it on his blog. The entry quickly spread among the blogging community and made its way to the microblogging site Twitter, where it became a highly discussed subject, featuring the hashtag: #amazonfail. In the roughly 48-hour window between when the news broke and when Amazon issued a statement, the online community criticized and speculated about the dilemma. Amazon contended that the problem came from a cataloging system error that affected many books in several broad categories like health and reproductive medicine, not just homosexuality.

employees defiling a pizza (Flandez, 2009)² (See Figure 1). Two weeks after the initial post, Carroll’s video ranked

Figure 1: YouTube Video Impact Via Blog Posts



third in a Google query for “United Airlines” (Hammond, 2009); as of October 2009, it ranked 11th. It was debated on popular television programming like *The Today Show*, *CNN*, *Jimmy Kimmel*, *Oprah*, and *The Early Show* (Sawhney, 2009; Varga, 2009); publications such as *USA Today*, *Newsweek*, and *The Wall Street Journal*; and popular blogs like *The Consumerist* and *Boing Boing* (Hammond, 2009). All the while, United never issued a formal apology on any traditional or Internet channel, although representatives did contact Carroll personally to rectify the matter. Despite the fact that United said it apologized to Carroll, spoke to the media, and made a donation to a music philanthropy according to

² In April 2009, two employees of a Conover, N.C., Domino’s Pizza restaurant posted a YouTube video of themselves violating public health laws by putting cheese in their noses, blowing mucous on a sandwich, and placing a dishwashing sponge in between their buttocks. The video went viral, and Domino’s officials were alerted. The two employees were arrested.

Carroll's request – all within roughly 72 hours of the video's launch – the organization still faced an onslaught of negative publicity. The question that remains is why?

When examining this crisis through well-known crisis communication theories, it could be argued that United used the right strategies to respond to Carroll. According to Attribution Theory, one of the common frameworks by which crisis communication is studied, United's crisis falls into the category of a "transgression" because organizational representatives (baggage handlers) knowingly violated a company regulation by tossing the band's instruments (Coombs, 1995). In response, Attribution Theory states that an organization should employ "mortification strategies" to try to win forgiveness from publics and create acceptance for the crisis (Marcus & Goodman, 1991; Sharkey & Stafford, 1990).

Accordingly, United practiced three known mortification strategies:

- *Remediation* by donating \$3,000 to charity in lieu of repaying Carroll, per his request;
- *Repentance* by apologizing to Carroll personally and admitting guilt to reporter inquiries; and
- *Rectification* of the matter by stating that it would use United Breaks Guitars as a training tool for new employees to prevent similar issues from occurring again ("Broken guitar song gets airline's attention," 2009).

United also practiced response strategies outlined by Timothy Coombs's (2006) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Through that lens, the United crisis is categorized into the "preventable cluster" as the organization knowingly took inappropriate actions and violated regulations (p. 244). SCCT maintains that "deal response strategies" should be exercised with preventable crises, which United did use after the video launched (p. 249). For example, United demonstrated:

- *Concern* by sympathizing with Carroll, commending his honesty;
- *Compassion* by making the charitable donation to Carroll's philanthropy of choice;
- *Regret* in admitting that the damage was inexcusable; and
- *Apology* when United called Carroll personally as well as vowing to use his video to train new employees ("Broken guitar song gets airline's attention," 2009).

Additionally, Coombs notes that crisis response strategies are optional, and crisis managers may choose what methods to use in a crisis. United used four of the five recommended deal response options, even though it was technically not obligated to use them at all.

What makes this different is that the current world of social networking appears to expose holes in these common response strategies often used by public relations practitioners. Given the fact that the application of these theories and strategies was greeted with negative feedback, there is a suggestion that United Breaks Guitars, and other crises like it, pose a different type of challenge that calls for innovative strategies. To that end, this thesis proposes that, with Internet usage increasing, organizations will constantly be susceptible to the phenomenon I will call a "social media wildfire." Before this term is defined, it is first important to examine the current trends in online communication in order to better understand the climate under which a social media wildfire may be sparked.

Unlike traditional organizational crises of the past whose news was proliferated through print and broadcast news (Goldstein, 2004), crises of this generation live on indefinitely and are fueled and perpetuated by conversation online (Barabasi, 2002). Messages and videos circulated online from person to person are known as "viral" and have the ability to soar in popularity (Golan & Zaidner, 2008). In its purest form, viral messaging is electronic, word-of-mouth advertising, "an unpaid peer-to-peer communication of provocative content

originating from an identified sponsor using the Internet to persuade or influence an audience to pass along the content to others” (Porter & Golan, 2006, p. 1). Due to the vast popularity of viral content, more research is being conducted to ascertain what exactly makes a video “go viral.” According to Golan and Zaidner (2008), if consumers are entertained or moved enough by humor or sexuality in a viral ad, they will likely forward it to friends and colleagues. Their claim was made based on the finding that 91% of viral ads incorporated humor and 28% used sexuality. Additionally, they found that the three most-prominent functions of viral advertising are branding, providing information, and making a call to action. Thus, if an ad possesses humor or sexuality, or demonstrates one of the named functions, it is more likely to be circulated.

Adding more strength to viral content is the research on word-of-mouth advertising that maintains that consumer-to-consumer communication outweighs advertiser-to-consumer communication in the modern age (Godin, 2001). Furthermore, Smith, Coyle, Lightfoot, and Scott, (2007) found that influence is not exclusive and is actually shared by most people, a finding which contrasts with conventional wisdom claiming that influence is not widespread and information is circulated by a few high-profile individuals. Their findings translated into a study on online influence and the power of the everyman to effectively disseminate information to a wide audience.

Many messages that “go viral” are often circulated through popular social media sites. Social media, often comprised of user-generated content, is characterized by the consumer’s participation in content creation, as opposed to utilizing media for consumption only (Agichtein, Castillo, Donato, Gionis, & Mishne, 2008). Common types of social media are blogs, microblogs (such as Twitter), web forums, social bookmarking sites, photo and video

sharing communities, as well as social networking platforms such as Facebook and MySpace. Often, social media are a carbon copy of an individual's preferences, likes, and dislikes. Thus, companies have attempted to become more engaged in social media to harness the available personal information for marketing and segmentation purposes. Andy Marken (2007) went so far as to compare social media to a person's primary identifying factor: "They leave a digital fingerprint of who they are, who/what they like/don't like, what they do/don't do, where they go/don't go and when they do all this stuff" (p. 9).

Social media and social networks are becoming a popular topic for research, especially because participation often leaves traces online, ripe for academic study. Boyd and Ellison (2007) identify three main utilities of social media sites that allow users to:

1. Construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system;
2. Articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection; and
3. View and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

More specifically, YouTube users are recognized for an exceptional sense of community, as "junkies" are known for spending hours posting responses in other community or subscriber channels (Hess, 2009). Rojas and Puig-i-Abril (2009) also contend that social networks are a forum for mobilization and a point of intersection for similar opinions.

With a clear understanding of the current online climate in regard to sharing content, the notion of a social media wildfire may be better understood. A social media wildfire occurs when user-generated content on a social media Web site negatively targets an organization or public figure, goes viral, and perpetuates negative perceptions of the affected entity's brand by a vast Internet audience. Online buzz created by the video often gets the attention of the

mainstream media, further escalating the popularity of the content. The social media component of a “wildfire” has the ability to accelerate the speed of information exchange light years faster than past media would allow, and often with no enforcement of accuracy.

Much like the conventional term of “spreading like wildfire,” this new phenomenon must possess viral qualities to be quickly circulated on Internet channels, often through multiple social media much like a person posting a tweet on Twitter with the link to a blog post. User-generated content may not fully transition into a social media wildfire if it is contained using specific communications techniques. Nevertheless, not all viral content constitutes a social media wildfire.

It is clear to see how rapidly United Breaks Guitars spread when examining its timeline of going viral. Carroll posted the song on Monday, July 6, 2009. After the first 23 hours, there were 461 comments on the video, primarily criticizing United (Reynolds, 2009). By Tuesday, the video received 24,000 views. Two days later on Thursday, it ballooned to 1.5 million views (Sawhney, 2009), and within the week, more than 3 million people saw the video (Hammond, 2009). Five months after its initial posting, YouTube reported that the video had nearly 6.4 million views, 23,632 comments, a five-star rating (out of a possible five stars), and was rated by more than 38,000 users (sonsofmaxwell, 2009). Keep in mind, however, that a video may go viral much like United Breaks Guitars, but if it does not target an entity, it will likely do no harm to a brand.

In essence, a brand is a series of meanings associated with an organization or entity (Armstrong & Kotler, 2009). Because a social media wildfire negatively affects a brand, the formulations of meanings become highly significant. The stronger the attribution of organizational responsibility is to a crisis, the higher the likelihood that publics will form

negative images of the organization (Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988). Certain attributions about a crisis and the responsibility of an organization may cause an audience to interact less with that organization and formulate certain beliefs and attitudes toward it, therefore affecting its brand. As such, if the user-generated content in a social media wildfire assigns blame to an organization, the audience may therefore formulate new, negative meanings associated with that brand. Thus, the problem becomes more complex. A social media wildfire is not just a new-age way to spread rumors, but rather an effective word-of-mouth marketing method that often alters the audience's perception and meaning associated with a brand. What's more, given the context of a social media wildfire and the expansive, nearly incalculable audience on the Internet, the potential spread of damaging information is difficult to fathom. Over two-thirds of the global online population visits social networks and blogs, and three of 10 people visit the social networking site Facebook at least once a month (NielsenWire, 2009). The potential reputational damage of a social media wildfire has the possibility of being devastating.

The Internet is characterized by scale-free connectivity meaning that there are several large, dominating Web sites that are linked to tremendous numbers of smaller Web sites (Smith et al., 2007). As such, social media sites are becoming those dominant players. Nielsen reported in 2009 that "social communities," which include social networks and blogs, are now the fourth-most popular online category, ahead of personal e-mail. Facebook is the fourth-largest Web site in the world (Schonfeld, 2009). Owned by Google, YouTube's numbers are harder to discern but nevertheless astronomical. Google sites, including YouTube, garner the most video views in the U.S. claiming 43% of the online video market share, but YouTube alone accounts for 99% of those viewed videos.

Information on social media sites like YouTube and Facebook is posted immediately with no delay, unlike traditional media. Users don't have to be tuned to the right television station or switch on the 6 o'clock news; instead they can go to social media Web sites at their leisure, and as many times as they please (Golan & Zaidner, 2008). What's more, if a person has an opinion about something, they may respond in real time through features like comment sections, posting response videos, or repeating a post or "retweeting" on Twitter. Online conversations are therefore initiated and sustained due to the fact that most sites allow an individual's response to be seen by other visitors. From an organization's perspective, online conversations like these may potentially spread incriminating or problematic information, which have the potential to wreak havoc on organizational image and reputation. United Breaks Guitars is just one example of how online conversation has contributed to a negative depiction of an organization, a dilemma that is becoming more frequent due to the fact that no systematic, research-based response technique has been created. It is a problem of the practice of public relations, and in this case crisis communication, getting ahead of the research (Coombs, 2008). Thus, a social media wildfire like United Breaks Guitars poses a different type of challenge that calls for new and innovative strategies.

To better understand and react to this new phenomenon, this thesis provides a detailed examination of the varying responses to United Breaks Guitars, through an applied case study, in order to identify what makes this crisis different from crises in the past and other similar social media crises. On the surface, this dilemma is a key example of how crisis scanning must be extended to consider social media. Further scrutiny reveals how expansive a social media crisis can be and that there is an immediate need for organizations to have a

broader understanding of these issues so as to address this rapidly growing phenomenon of the social media wildfire.

Additionally, because this crisis involved new technology, there is a suggestion that traditional strategies emphasized by crisis communication theories such as SCCT and Attribution theory may be obsolete. To that point, this paper will provide a new way of studying crisis communication through the lens of symbolic interactionism so as to eventually provide new solutions and a foundation for future academic study. Symbolic interactionism posits that community and interactivity among individuals and the material world construct meaning (Fernback, 2005). As such, this thesis argues that symbolic interactions occur instantaneously and constantly on social media networks because they are online spaces existing for the purpose of forming relationships among users of a community (Agichtein, Castillo, Donato, Gionis, & Mishne, 2008). Social media need communities to exist and as a result, individuals in those communities experience symbolic interactions, as was the case with United Breaks Guitars. Because of the commonalities between the theory and the medium, as well as their reciprocal nature, the pairing was made for this study.

Background

United Breaks Guitars: The details.

On his Web site, Dave Carroll outlined his exchange, step-by-step, between United Airlines employees throughout the duration of the crisis (Carroll, 2009). In March of 2008, while waiting to take off to begin a tour in Nebraska, Carroll and his fellow band mate overheard a female passenger sitting nearby cry out, “My God, they’re throwing guitars out there!” At the time, baggage handlers were loading bags onto the plane, which was still parked on the tarmac. Carroll recognized the band’s instruments and was unnerved despite

the fact that his \$3,500 Taylor guitar was packed into a hard case as well as a padded exterior case. Carroll immediately alerted a flight attendant who referred him to two other United employees, both of whom stated that they could not be of service and that he should take it up with the grounds crew in Omaha – the plane’s final destination. Upon landing after midnight, Carroll received his luggage, examined it, and discovered that the base of his guitar had suffered considerable damage. Due to the late hour of the night, Carroll stated that he could not locate any United employees to report the incident, and therefore conceded to take up the case on his return flight that would bring him back through Omaha. When Carroll returned, he was told he would need to begin a claim at the airport where the trip began in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Upon doing so, the claim was rejected because airport employees told Carroll that United did not technically have a presence in the Canadian airport and instead used Air Canada as a partner. As a result, Air Canada rejected the claim and understandably denied negligence.

After the rejection, Carroll called United’s customer service line, speaking on multiple occasions to representatives who he believed were outsourced to India. He recalls that those employees appeared to be genuinely sorry for what occurred and were very pleasant, despite being unable to resolve the problem. Carroll was eventually redirected to United’s Chicago baggage offices, and after multiple attempts to speak with a representative, was told that he would need to bring his guitar to Chicago from Nova Scotia to be inspected. When Carroll told the representative that this could not be easily accomplished, he was then told that his claim would need to be redirected through United’s central baggage service in New York. A representative there “seemed to feel” for Carroll and asked that he fax her all the information. After following up with the representative and subsequently being asked for a few extra days

for processing, the number was disconnected, which forced Carroll to begin again with the customer representatives in India. It had now been six months since the incident occurred and Carroll, a full-time musician, was forced to have the guitar repaired for the price of \$1,200 to a “state that plays well but had lost much of what made it special” (Carroll, 2009, para. 2).

In his continuing correspondence with the representatives off-site, he was able to get a customer service manager to forward a note to an employee in Chicago who was to contact him. One month later, Carroll received a letter with no contact information stating that a United representative would be in touch with him shortly. After roughly one more month, a representative named Marianne Irlweg sent an e-mail to Carroll apologizing for the incident but rejecting the claim for the following reasons:

- Carroll did not report the damage to United employees upon landing in Omaha (although he attempted and did not see an employee on site);
- He failed to report the incident to the Omaha United employees within 24 hours, time during which he was on tour; and
- Someone from United would need to see the damage; however, Carroll, a career musician, already had the guitar repaired.

After multiple exchanges with Irlweg, she ended the conversation stating that United would not take any responsibility and closed the matter. She did not allow Carroll to speak to her supervisor and also rejected his final offer of a settlement of \$1,200 in flight vouchers to make up for fees incurred by repairing the guitar. In his final reply to Irlweg, Carroll said he would write and create three YouTube videos outlining his experience with United Airlines. Since his exchange with her, Carroll has stated publicly that Irlweg was merely doing her

job, was an excellent and unflappable employee, and that he recognized this professionalism throughout their communications (CBSNewsOnline, 2009; sonsofmaxwell, 2009).

United Airlines never proactively addressed the matter with formal announcements or press releases regarding its exchange with Carroll, which became part of an international conversation. Instead, its responses to United Breaks Guitars can be described as reactionary in nature because the only times United publicly communicated about the song were in response to media inquiries. As a result, the details of the exchange can only be taken from Carroll's perspective, as United did not offer any direct counter to the facts that he outlined. Spokespeople from United have responded to reporter inquiries and are quoted in newspaper articles (Jackson, 2009; Negroni, 2009), posted "tweets" on Twitter, and have commented in areas following online newspaper articles (Cosh, 2009; Mutzabaugh, 2009). These and other documented communications made by United Airlines will be analyzed later in this thesis.

On July 7, 2009, one day following Carroll's posting of the first video, United stated it called Carroll to apologize and "make it right" (Reynolds, 2009, para. 15). Days after Carroll posted the video, United Airlines customer solutions representative Rob Bradford called to offer the \$1,200 to Carroll for repairs as well as a matching amount of flight vouchers. He declined the offer, suggesting that United give the rewards to other passengers who might be "down on their luck or needed flights or the money" and surprise them with a gift (Bliss, 2009, para. 6). Instead United made a charitable donation to the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz per Carroll's suggestion for the amount of \$3,000. United has also stated that it would be using Carroll's video to train employees and that his actions also changed internal policies allowing employees the authority to resolve complaints more quickly (Alcoba, 2009).

The survival of the United Airlines brand.

It can be argued that the video, *United Breaks Guitars*, and its implications for United's reputation aided in the deterioration of a brand once heralded for exceptional customer service. Founded in 1926 as an airmail operation, United Airlines is one of the pioneers of commercial aviation in the United States (United Airlines Web site, 2009a). Early on, it made strides to emphasize a passion for customer service. In fact, it was a subsidiary of United that introduced the world's first stewardesses who were added to comfort flyers and serve refreshments. From 1965 until 1996, its famous slogan "come fly the friendly skies" became a well-known motto stressing United's commitment to excellence in customer service (Lawrence & Teinowitz, 1996). As a result, consumers have known United for its dedication to be the best in the airline industry. Said *The New York Times*, "United is one of the proudest names in airline history. It has long been a synonym for fine service and extensive, convenient routes" (Stein, 2006, para. 4).

Nevertheless, in the last decade – although some sources contend that customer relationships began to fray in the mid-1990s (Johnsson, 2009b) – United has experienced its fair share of tribulations that have led to employee unrest and subsequent customer displeasure. In 1994, employees sacrificed deep pay cuts and benefits in exchange for ownership of the company as workers participated in the largest buyout in airline history (Bryant, 1994). Uncertainties from that buyout were still unsettled in 2000 when United pilots – many still upset from the buyout's pay cuts and lapsed contracts – went on strike, resulting in the cancellation of some 30,000 flights and thousands of delays (Arndt, 2000). In an attempt to rinse the bad taste from customers' mouths, then-CEO Jim Goodwin publicly apologized in a 30-second television spot, striving to make changes to avoid future crises

(Adams, 2000). In 2007, operational meltdowns hit again as storms in Chicago and Denver stranded thousands of passengers and canceled hundreds more flights, catastrophes that many considered another blow to United's reputation (Hucko, 2007).

The next dilemma to hit was one that crippled the entire airline industry: 9/11. Yet, United played a more unique role as two of the four planes involved were UA flights: Flight 93 that crashed in Pennsylvania and Flight 175 that struck the north tower of the World Trade Center (Heinzmann, 2001). Due in part to the industry aftershocks of 9/11, United filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2002 becoming the world's biggest airline bankruptcy in history ("The night of the killer zombies," 2002). Again, the airline attempted to reassure consumers by promising "even better service" as well as "a new beginning" (para. 1) with the confirmation of Chapter 11. Bankruptcy ended in 2006, yet internal turmoil continued due to employees' lost pay and pensions during the three-year bankruptcy and unfruitful merger talks with Delta, Continental, and US Air (Johnsson, 2009b). Further, United's post-bankruptcy restructuring plan was criticized for not considering oil-price increases or the possibility of decreasing operating costs (Corridore, 2009; "United Airlines emerges from bankruptcy," 2006). For these reasons, Corridore (2009) warned that United may be susceptible to losses during industry downturns.

By 2007, United ranked next to last among 20 of the largest U.S. carriers in on-time performance and had the second most frequently delayed flight: a Chicago to Minneapolis route that was late 97 percent of the time (Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2007). Additionally, 2009 brought negative press in the form of raised checked-bag fees from \$5 to \$20 (Corridore, 2009) as well as the arrest of a United pilot who was preparing to lead a transatlantic flight while intoxicated (Bunch, 2009), not to mention Carroll's videos. Four

months after his first song posted, United received additional criticism regarding another UA flight with Carroll aboard. While on the way to speak to customer service executives, United lost Carroll's luggage containing CDs of United Breaks Guitars. The tone of coverage hinted that United had still not learned its lesson (Negroni, 2009).

Based on the given timeline of events within the past decade, it can be argued that because of United's challenges in maintaining its high standard of customer service, it has fractured ties with consumers. Passengers also are not hesitating to voice their opinions through the media, "United customer service is almost an oxymoron," said Bob Trevelyan of California. "A new fleet and everything else is great. But until they change the attitude of management and in-flight [crews], it's not going to matter" (Johnsson, 2009a, para. 9). Back in 2000, a Harris Interactive study showed that United Airlines had the fourth-best reputation in domestic airlines when questioned about features like safety, customer trust, service, and food (Hucko & Broderick, 2000). In the same study repeated in 2008, however, United dropped to seventh place and also was categorized as being a weak or vulnerable airline (Berg, 2008). To date, YouTube has tabulated more than 23,000 comments on the first United Breaks Guitars video alone, most of which do not support UA. United's satisfaction rates have fallen the greatest amount among airlines as well, ranking last in two of past three years based on the University of Michigan's American Customer Satisfaction Index (Johnsson, 2009b). In August of 2009, YouGov's BrandIndex reported that Carroll's viral videos many have hurt the airline's consumer reputation as participants in a 5,000-person sample reported far more negative perceptions of United's brand than positive (Irwin, 2009). The study also recorded sizable drops in reputation during releases of two of Carroll's

videos, United Breaks Guitars, posted July 6, 2009, and United Breaks Guitars Song 2, which appeared on YouTube as well, August 17, 2009.

Although United still ranks as one of the top-grossing airlines in the country, much of its recent press has been largely negative, aimed specifically at its customer service. In moving forward, the context of the company's background will contribute to the understanding of how damaging a customer-service error like United Breaks Guitars was to an organization that was already under severe scrutiny for similar issues.

Chapter II: Literature Review

According to crisis communication expert Timothy Coombs, crisis communication in relation to social media is a situation in which the practice is outpacing the research (2008). Scholars have tracked whether or not practitioners are actually applying public relations research by evaluating crisis communications “best practices” against 18 years worth of public relations crises (Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009). Research suggested that practitioners fail to choose and combine the correct strategies to combat the crises they face, demonstrating that the bridge between theory and practice may not be as “solid” as it should be after 18 years of research. Further, many practitioners question common crisis protocol, even when they are specifically questioned about social media challenges in particular (Neff, 2009). Marketing and strategy officers often indicate that not responding to online crises is less risky than bringing more attention to a dilemma that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Still, there is exhaustive literature outlining the traditional framework of crisis communication (Barton, 1993; Coombs, 1995; Egelhoff & Sen, 1992; Marconi, 1992; Mitroff & Pearson, 1993; Regester, 1989) as well as associated theory branching from the body of knowledge such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2002) and Attribution Theory (Weiner, 2000). In its purest form, a crisis is defined as an event that threatens the image of an organization (Barton, 1993), and crisis response strategies seek to protect that image (Coombs, 1995). To potentially mitigate the damages of a crisis, organizations formulate crisis communication plans that exist for implementation during a crisis for the purpose of overriding normal policies and protocols (Stanton, 2002).

The first step in a crisis plan is establishing a spokesperson (Barton, 1993), someone who is effective, quick to speak to the media, consistent, open, sympathetic, and informative (Coombs, 1999). Coombs also notes that the main disadvantage of a fast response is that “obviously speed increases risk” (p. 114). A spokesperson does not have to be the first source of information during a crisis as news releases and other conventional tactics are often used (Efthimiou, 2008). Crisis plans are crafted for specific crises and should be updated often.

Nevertheless, few scholarly articles exist on the relatively new application of social media in corporate communication. Kent and Taylor (1998) recognized early that organizations needed to utilize the Internet and Web sites for communication with various publics and specifically predicted that public relations practitioners could use the forums to respond immediately to organizational problems. Using Dialogic Communications Theory as a framework for relationship building, they explored an organization’s utilization of the Internet as use began trending toward a communication tool for publics. A decade after Kent and Taylor’s initial call to action, Barnes and Mattson (2008) conducted the first longitudinal study which showed that not just the Internet, but social media, were being implemented in the business world.

As social media began to proliferate on the Internet, blogs were an initial trend. These electronic journals quickly transitioned from being an outlet for mere personal expression to a forum to air grievances or laud companies and products. During this intermediary stage, Goldstein (2004) warned public relations practitioners that they must stay aware of blogs, as the online tools can be destructive to reputation and perpetuate unsubstantiated falsehoods. In fact, on October 6, 2009, the Federal Trade Commission announced new guidelines for bloggers to disclose endorsements or payments received from organizations, so as to protect

customer interests (Kang, 2009). The FTC claims it created these guidelines because of the amount of trust consumers now put in blogs.

The popularity of blogs and their relation to a company's need for crisis communication is evidenced through the amount of existing scholarly research (Burns, 2008; Duke, 2009; Macias, Hilyard, & Freimuth, 2009). Macias, Hilyard, and Freimuth (2009), in their study on risk and crisis functions of blogs during Hurricane Katrina, found that blogs fell under four distinct categories of use: communication, political, information, and helping. Researchers noted that in the aftermath of the storm, people used the blogs to communicate with one another about missing persons, calls to rescue, or personal experiences with the hurricane. Many posts conveyed a political tone in that users blogged about the government's general response to the storm as well as their stance on looting. Others utilized blogs for the key purpose of information exchange, discussing subjects such as official news, providing details about missing individuals, and the status of homes and areas of the state. Lastly, a helping function was found within blog posts in which individuals offered one another a support system, a sense of community, and resources for assistance. Further, their study indicated that generally blogs also foster a sense of community as well as providing an emotive and therapeutic outlet for users.

Besides blogs, the small amount of existing, relevant literature features an assessment of other online media. For example, Choi and Lin (2009) studied consumer responses to Mattel product recalls on two online bulletin boards. Stephens and Malone (2009) analyzed blogs, Web sites, online news articles, and press releases with the goal of understanding what emotional support an audience will receive from a given outlet during a crisis. As Stephens and Malone considered more traditional, online news articles and press releases, Falkheimer

and Heide (2009) also encouraged organizations not to completely abandon traditional media as many publics may not have Internet access, nor an inclination to use the Internet, so as to utilize social media. In the same vein, Nagatsuna (2007) pointed out that cultural differences often dictate the tactics used to respond to a crisis. She made the point that despite the fact that United States and Japan share similar Internet usage rates, nearly 70% of Japanese crises still employ traditional techniques of press releases on Web sites compared to 47% in the U.S. She attributes this finding to the highly influential print media in Japan that has subsequently made media relations the primary function of Japanese public relations practitioners. As a result, public relations tools are tailor-fit to a journalist's demands.

Rather than homing in on a single medium or a handful of media, some researchers focus on the general trends and changes social media are facilitating in crisis communication. For instance, González-Herrero and Smith (2008) studied how Internet-based technologies are affecting companies, for better or for worse, as well as the pressure they apply to institute virtual media crisis plans. They also analyzed the attitude, tone, and language of Internet speech toward consumers versus other audiences during a crisis. Authors provided detailed guidelines for how an organization should communicate starting from issues management and the prevention-planning stage spanning to the post-crisis. With regard to attitude, tone, and language, they advised that practitioners should adapt to the dynamic of the situation and online environment. Similarly, Conway, et al. (2007) studied Internet Crisis Potential from the perspective of 230 corporate communications directors in Germany and found that “perceived threat from ICP is not translating itself into corporate action” (p. 223).

While a great deal of research investigated crisis communication based on theories such as SCCT, Attribution Theory, and Image Restoration Theory (Kim et al., 2009), this paper

seeks to use a framework that only recently has been employed: symbolic interactionism. Only one other scholarly work was found that examines crisis communication through symbolic interaction in a public relations environment. The article discussed symbolic interactionism through the crisis involving Major League Baseball star Sammy Sosa corking his bat and therefore knowingly violating an MLB rule (Domingo, 2003). The author posits that public relations practitioners create symbolic messages to influence how the public interprets the organization's desired meaning through examples like news conferences and sound bites. Symbols like these "indirectly negotiate baseball's image by the fans' terms" (p. 21) because the media report information based on what the fans want to know. In tailoring messages to fans' demands, the organization was able to negotiate Sosa's image with publics in order to shape the way he was perceived. In conclusion, the author uses the metaphor of the cork to drive his message home:

Cork is porous. But symbolic interactions with your publics fill your crisis's holes by anticipating needs and concerns. Accommodate. Inform. Reassure. In sum, negotiate image. Then use that cork to plug "Scammin' Sammy" swagger, and bring "Slammin' Sammy" back to the fans. (p. 22)

The next-closest application of symbolic interactionism to a crisis situation in public relations is in Zhang's (2006) assessment of diplomacy as symbolic interaction during the Asian tsunami relief campaign. Zhang examined media coverage and interpretation of international relief efforts after the tsunami, using symbolic interaction for its ability to construct and interpret meanings of events through various frames. He concluded that relief efforts were conceptualized as symbolic interactionist processes in which nations were actively constructing and negotiating meanings of symbols and performing actions based on meanings similar to Domingo's (2003) "image negotiation" tactic. While Zhang focused on the idea of "acts" and participants as "actors" reacting to one another's actions and

interpretations, the current research will more closely examine the symbolic interaction tenet of texts as languages.

As explored through symbolic interaction, the relationship between the organization and its publics may be a reciprocal one. The relationship can become so intimate, in fact, that individuals often accurately predict a company's crisis responses based on perceptions of the dominant coalition's leadership (Hwang & Cameron, 2009). Therefore, in keeping with Domingo's (2003) argument for negotiation of image, if an organization's relationship with its desired publics becomes familiar enough, that audience will already anticipate the actions of the company based on its perceptions of the company's image.

Nevertheless, it is only recently that public relations research implemented the framework of symbolic interactionism (e.g., Zhang, 2005). Gordon (1997) agreed that public relations managers regularly participate in the social construction of meaning, in which the organization is but one actor in a large social dynamic that continually forms meaning. Like Domingo (2003), Anderson (2003) found that the MLB's public relations strategies built and maintained the image of baseball according to the symbolic interactionism philosophy. Finally, Saxer (1993) indicated that both public relations and symbolic politics develop and use symbols to achieve goals. It is clear from the existing research that symbolic interaction and public relations both construct meaning from symbols and interactions between publics; however, there is still a need for application of this framework to crisis communication.

The philosophy of symbolic interaction has also been applied to research in fields closely related to public relations. Leiss, Kline, and Jhally (1997) argued that marketing communication verbalizes and imagines possible meanings of products and services while facilitating exchanges of meanings stemming from social interactions. Solomon (1983) used

symbolic interactionism to demonstrate how marketed products serve as a priori stimuli to behavior. He concluded that the consumer relies upon social meanings inherent in products that in turn influence social roles and serve as mediators of self-definition and role performance.

Furthermore, studies about advertising and symbolic interactionism have been conducted over the years. Early on, Reid and Frazer (1979) applied symbolic interactionism to study children's relationship with television commercials; in particular, the environment the commercial creates, how the child behaves in the environment, and how it affects the way children form realities. Wells (1994) examined the influence of Russian culture on advertising in the former Soviet Union and the perceived problem of using Western concepts. She used symbolic interaction as the study's lens because it suggested that meanings vary among different people and at different times. Although these works are dated, it could be argued that the contexts of the articles indicate that symbolic interaction is a concept applied to research early so as to establish foundational knowledge. Similarly, since social media is a new technology, the use of symbolic interactionism is appropriate so as to also create a baseline set of beliefs regarding the medium.

In examining the existing literature, it is clear that there is a specific need for more research on this topic, to reinforce current practice and also to study new media like YouTube, the primary social medium associated with United Breaks Guitars. As seen in past research, symbolic interactionism is a framework that has been applied to public relations, as well as the related fields of marketing and advertising; however, there is a need to examine the phenomenon of social media using a well-established framework as it relates to the digital age.

Chapter III: Research Questions and Method

Crisis communication expert Timothy Coombs (2008) used these words to summarize the current climate: “The rapid evolution of new media often results in the practice of public relations getting ahead of research. The practice of crisis communication is ahead of research in terms of social media” (para. 1). Little research exists on the area of public relations and social media crises, despite the rapid proliferation of social media as a preferred channel for communication. There is, at best, a weak, informal backbone to support the practice that public relations managers are currently implementing. To remedy this problem, this paper seeks to answer the following questions:

- RQ1** How does the public’s response to the video United Breaks Guitars constitute a social media wildfire?
- RQ2** How did United Airlines respond to the United Breaks Guitars video and what were the reactions to those responses?
- RQ3** What are the implications for public relations managers when formulating crisis response strategies?

To address these questions, I will conduct a thematic analysis of the various reactions of stakeholders online through varying texts. Texts are words, images, or sounds that are set into a material form of some kind from which they can be read, seen, heard, watched, and so on (Smith, 2006). In the example of United Breaks Guitars the texts analyzed will be the first YouTube video posted by Carroll, a sample of the comments about the video, excerpts of Internet articles in which United responded to the video, as well as the “tweets” that

addressed the video. When the texts are assembled, I will identify patterns and themes as related to the research questions.

Under the umbrella of symbolic interactionism, Manis and Meltzer (1972) identify six basic theoretical propositions, one of which will be salient in this study: the idea of language as the primary mechanism of development of the individual's mind and self. With regard to symbolic interaction, the goal of this research will be unearthing the common "languages" that emerge via social media during a crisis. According to the theory, the individuals' created meaning continually evolves through social interaction – and in this case *online* social interaction in which users responded to United Breaks Guitars – and influences perceptions about his or her culture (Blumer, 1969; Musolf, 2003).

Reflexivity

With regard to self-positioning, as a researcher, I knew little about either party. I had no preference or distaste for United Airlines, nor was I a fan of Dave Carroll, his band Sons of Maxwell, or even their genre of music. Prior to reading about the video, I had never heard of Carroll or Sons of Maxwell, and I knew little about United Airlines as a company or its corporate reputation. In studying this topic, I recognize that I would be able to sympathize with a "normal guy" like Carroll, as his story of damaged luggage could happen to me. However, as a former public relations practitioner and student in the field, I am concerned with portraying United as fairly as possible so as to understand how and why the company responded with the tactics used.

Analysis

The United Airlines crisis was analyzed using an applied case study. Because of the interest in how social media affect crises, I paid close attention to the dialogue and other

symbolic interactions during this crisis on social media channels, primarily focusing on the numerous comments to the video on YouTube. For the purpose of obtaining United's response to the video, traditional forms of media, such as newspapers, magazine articles, and press releases were examined, blog posts, and also United's "tweets" on Twitter, as that was the medium in which the organization first responded to United Breaks Guitars. Additionally, I conducted one in-depth interview with the creator of United Breaks Guitars, Dave Carroll, to gain insight into his perspective on how social media are changing the landscape of crisis communication.

Due to the volume of entries, a random sample was taken of the comments on the YouTube video. The sample of 378 was calculated using Wimmer and Dominick's (2009) sample size calculator, using a confidence level of 95% and confidence interval of five. The comments were outputted into "pages" containing 500 comments per page and at the time the research was conducted, there were 47 total pages. From there, the random numbers chart was used to select a page to code (Wimmer & Dominick, 1993). The number selected was 20, so the first 378 comments on the 20th page were coded. By coding an entire page, I was able to capture not only viewer responses to the video, but also individuals' responses to one another's entries. Had I coded by entry (i.e., every n th entry), I would not have been able to observe individuals' interactions with one another on the comments forum. Given that symbolic interaction is based on individual's interactions with peers, I felt it was important to code by page. Comments and codes were then stored and recorded using the qualitative analysis software, Atlas.ti.

I began by formatting and importing the 20th page of comments into Atlas. I read the first 378 comments, skipping over entries written in languages other than English, identifying

similar patterns and recurring themes about the content and the way individuals were using the comments forum. After completion of the coding process, I collapsed and combined similar codes. In the end, 30 codes emerged on an extensive variety of topics and themes. Codes were so scattered in subject matter that it proved difficult to group them all under similar themes. To that end, most codes fell into five themes: polarization, alternate utility of comment forum, change of behavior, effectiveness of social media, and defining the crux of the problem. The remaining codes were categorized based on tone and if their content was off-topic. After the comments were sorted and categorized, the last step was to summarize the responses and identify the salient perceptions of the individuals who posted comments. The theory of symbolic interactionism was applied to discern the meanings formulated by these individuals. In turn, those emerging meanings provided insight to public relations practitioners on how the public recommends they handle crises in a social media environment.

To find United's response, multiple search methods were used to identify news articles and blog posts containing any reaction by United about Carroll's video. First, a search was conducted using the database LexisNexis News, a resource for financial reports; company profiles; SEC filings and reports; corporate directories; business articles from newspapers, magazines, journals, wires and transcripts; and industry reports. The search terms "United Airlines," "guitar," and "spokes" (to yield articles in which a UA spokesperson was mentioned) were used, limited to the dates of July 6, 2009 to December 6, 2009. July 6 was chosen because it is the date the video was first posted. The search ended exactly five months later on December 6 in order to isolate the response surrounding the first video from subsequent videos or news about other United Breaks Guitars events. In evaluating the

coverage of the first song, it also seemed that there was no new news by December and that coverage of Song 1 was beginning to taper off. The database searched within the following categories: major U.S. and world publications, news wire services, TV and radio broadcast transcripts, blogs, and web publications. Results yielded 17 entries, and each one was skimmed for a response from United, both direct and indirect quotes. Similar searches using the databases Business Source Premier and Factiva yielded few or no results at all, and of the results none displayed United's response. The main source of responses was garnered from a Google search using the same terms, which yielded 4,300 results. I scanned web pages relevant to the query including blogs, organization Web sites, and news organizations. From those results, I skimmed articles for their inclusion of United's response and implemented articles or blog posts containing new and not-repeated information.

Also, United briefly responded to the video on its Twitter account and its tweets were included in analysis. In order to find tweets pertaining to Carroll and United Breaks Guitars, I found the United Twitter feed and extended the display of entries by using the "more" function at the bottom of the feed until I reached the date of July 6. I then read United's tweets starting from posts on July 6, 2009 to December 6, 2009 – again, starting from the day the video was posted and concluding five months later. I recorded all tweets that mentioned or alluded to Dave Carroll and Song 1.

Once all texts were assembled and the comments coded, thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and themes as related to the research questions. By examining a wide array of discourse from multiple publics associated with this crisis, I hoped to better understand and isolate specific perceptions and meanings in relation to the phenomena of a "social media wildfire." Coding the YouTube comments most specifically relates to RQ 1

and RQ 3 related to the publics' response and the implications of those responses for public relations managers. With that said, I looked for any salient qualities including, but not limited to, who individuals sided with and supported, the tone of responses (did they use emoticons, punctuation or expletives?), and how individuals used the comment forums (for example, did people air similar grievances about United or other airlines?). The variation of the themes provided further insight into the identification of a social media wildfire, as comments with assorted themes demonstrated how individuals can send a dilemma spiraling out of control with speculation, idle banter, and unrelated contributions to the conversation. Additionally, I looked for themes that may provide insight for public relations managers as to how the public would have wanted them to respond. Other social media crises were compared to the United Breaks Guitar case to ascertain if the responses to other crises are similar or different and what the outcomes were in the other social media wildfire cases.

Limitations

This thesis assesses data related to the first United Breaks Guitar video only; subsequent research will be necessary to analyze responses to two subsequent videos that complete the trilogy. In his final correspondence with United, Carroll promised to create three videos; two of which had been posted at the time this research began. However, the third video had not been released. While the second video was live at the time of the research, I chose not to include it due to the fact that it did not experience the same degree of viral success as the first video. While inclusion and analysis of all three videos would likely make a more robust analysis of a "social media wildfire," I still feel that the research questions will be adequately answered in examining the first video alone.

Another limitation to this study is the fact that a great deal of online conversation occurring on blogs or other media such as chat rooms or social networks was difficult, and in some cases impossible, to capture. While many social media are protected by privacy settings – such as conversation occurring on Facebook – others are just too vast to measure. For instance, a Google search of blogs, using the terms United Breaks Guitars identified more than 78,000 results, a cumbersome number for one researcher to comb through. Nevertheless, I tried to capture an adequate snapshot of the conversation occurring online, despite the fact that the online content was so vast.

Conceptual Framework and Rationale for Application

The chief purpose of social media is to form relationships among users of a community (Agichtein et al., 2008); therefore, this medium was examined through the theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism, a concept rooted in meanings formed by interactions between individuals. Symbolic interaction posits that the individual and the material world construct meaning through interactivity and community (Fernback, 2005). On the whole, symbolic interaction is defined by three premises: (a) that humans act toward things on the basis of meanings they already have for a given thing, (b) the meanings of such things arise from social exchange with peers, and (c) that meanings are handled and modified through an interpretive process of the individual in his or her encounters (Blumer, 1969). Thus, the created meaning continually evolves through social interaction, and influences an individual's perceptions about his or her culture (Blumer, 1969; Musolf, 2003). In symbolic interactionism, the tenet of meaning remains the principal concept as opposed to other behavior science theories that may devalue or ignore meaning altogether (Blumer, 1969). What further differentiates interactionist belief about meaning is its emphasis on conscious

interpretation; in other words the internal conversation a person experiences when a he or she “consciously considers, thinks about, or interprets” an object (Littlejohn, 1977, p. 87).

Symbolic interactionism is further characterized by six basic theoretical propositions as noted by Manis and Meltzer (1972):

1. Mind, self, and society are processes of personal and interpersonal interaction – not separate from but growing out of interactions;
2. Language is the primary mechanism of development of the individual’s mind and self;
3. The mind is conceived as the internalization of social processes in the individual;
4. Behaviors are *constructed* by the person in the course of *acting*;
5. The primary vehicle for human conduct is the definition of the situation by the actor; and
6. The self is seen as consisting of societal and unique definitions.

In this paper, the framework of symbolic interaction is an appropriate lens for study because the fundamental tenets of the theory are evident in crisis situations that necessitate a communications plan. Signs of symbolic interactions during crisis communication clearly emerge when comparing the process to Blumer’s (1969) three prongs of symbolic interaction.

The first premise stating that humans act toward things on the basis of meanings they already have is comparable to the idea of felt involvement during a crisis. Felt involvement refers to an individual’s perceived personal relevance that in turn influences cognition and behavior (Celsi & Olsen, 1988; Peter & Olsen, 1990). The personal relevance felt by an individual contributes to a higher level of involvement he or she exerts when comprehending

messages. The higher the involvement, the more meaning assigned or interpreted in a given crisis situation. In the example of United Breaks Guitars, individuals who have experienced similar luggage or instrument damage at the hands of an airline are considered more highly involved and therefore may formulate different meaning than someone who had not shared the same experience. Thus, it is clear that Blumer's (1969) proposition of previously formulated meaning and the crisis term of personal relevance are closely related.

Secondly, Blumer (1969) contends that meanings arise from social exchange with peers. Comparable to this point, felt involvement (which eventually yields meaning) arises from comprehending incoming information, such as that received from other individuals (Celsi & Olsen, 1988). For example, the meanings formed by audiences who watch United Breaks Guitars will likely be influenced by interactions with the other online viewers on YouTube who comment on the video. Further, some scholars argue that level of felt involvement is a function of situational factors, such as interactions with peers (Choi & Lin, 2009).

Finally, the last of Blumer's (1969) premises is that meanings are handled and modified through an interpretive process of the individual in his or her encounters. In other words, meaning is constantly evolving based on interactions between individuals – similar to the way meaning can change during the execution of crisis communication plans. An organization is constantly working to communicate messages that not only respond to a given situation (i.e., a crisis) but do so in a way that will satisfy its publics, based on the meaning and purpose they have assigned to the organizational event. The way that an organization handles a crisis projects a certain image to which its publics will assign meaning. From the perspective of a public relations practitioner, that meaning can be manipulated based on the messages communicated during a crisis (Domingo, 2003). It is evident that during a crisis,

the subsequent interactions of all involved parties contribute to the meanings they each hold for a given organization.

In comparing Blumer's (1969) three premises of symbolic interaction to research related to crisis communication, it is evident that the two bodies of knowledge share similarities. While symbolic interaction appears to be the ideal theory to study crisis communication, the chosen method of a case analysis also fits satisfactorily into this thesis. Early research on symbolic interaction trended toward the use of case histories or case studies as a favorite method of research (Meltzer & Petras, 1970). Case histories provide a record of history, environment, and relevant details of a case especially for use in analysis or illustration (Merriam-Webster, 2010). Much like the early research on symbolic interaction, this thesis uses case analysis to examine the theory and the concept of a social media wildfire.

Chapter IV: Results

Content Analysis of YouTube Comments

The sample of 378 comments was coded to find out the public's reaction to the United Breaks Guitars video. After completion of the coding process, 30 codes emerged on an extensive range of topics and themes. Roughly two-thirds (21) of the codes were broadly grouped into five themes: change of behavior, polarization, effectiveness of social media, defining the crux of the problem, and alternate utility of comment forum. Each theme was intended to indicate the meanings an individual associated with United Airlines, Carroll, as well as the overall situation and resolution of United Breaks Guitars.

The remaining codes were split into two valuable observation categories that revealed (a) the tone of responses and (b) off-topic comments. Codes in the "tone of response" category referred to the over-arching mood or feeling conveyed in a comment such as use of expletives, surprise, humor, and authoritative speech. Off-topic comments were identified as those that did not relate to any facet of United Breaks Guitars and neglected the video completely. Codes under this category discussed topics like religion or attempts at publicizing other people's YouTube content. An identifying quality of a social media wildfire is the spiraling, speculative, out-of-control dynamic of information exchange. Thus, the inclusion of the off-topic codes is a significant and important indicator of the phenomenon.

Additionally, it is important to note that while coding, some of the exchanges and conversations between individuals were highlighted for their significance, in addition to the

individual comments listed in this section. Seven conversations featured individuals arguing for or against Carroll. Eight conversations involved individuals becoming verbally aggressive and threatening in tone. Other conversations mirrored some of the individual codes; for instance, some discussions asked a series of questions about the video while others gave advice on the best way to stow instruments.

Table 1 provides a breakdown of all five themes, the codes that feed each one, and the frequencies. Table 2 displays the observations made regarding tone and off-topic comments, the related codes, and their frequencies.

Table 1 <i>Codes identified in YouTube comments subdivided into five themes.</i>	
Themes	Codes
1. Polarization (n=245)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Supportive/Approving Comments (for Carroll) (n=143) ○ Negative United (n=43) ○ Carroll as the "Little Guy" (n=22) ○ Negative airline industry (n=21) ○ Negative Carroll (n=7) ○ Support United (n=6)
2. Alternate Utility of Comment Forum (n=82)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Want Carroll Products (n=29) ○ Share similar United story (n=20) ○ Question/comment about video (n=10) ○ Post News (n=9) ○ Share similar story - not specific to United (n=9) ○ Passenger Rights (n=5)
3. Change of Behavior (n=63)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Convinced to not fly United (n=24) ○ Shame on United (n=23) ○ Suggest substitute airline/Preferred airline (n=8) ○ Shame on Carroll (n=7) ○ Therapeutic (n=4)
4. Effectiveness of Social Media (n=47)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Effective (n=37) ○ Universal/Touched Many People (n=9) ○ United would have done nothing if not for video (n=1)
5. Define Crux of Problem (n=27)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Politics/Justice (n=21) ○ Economic/Money (n=6)

Table 2 Remaining codes divided based on their content into two significant groups.	
Observation	Code
<i>Tones of comments</i> (n=115)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Authoritative (n=33) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advice (n=17) • Cultural explanations (n=12) • Defining (n=2) • Out of our hands (n=2) ○ Emoticon (n=31) ○ Humor (n=28) ○ Expletive (n=19) ○ Surprise/disbelief (n=4)
<i>Off-topic comments</i> (n=25)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Off-Topic (in general) (n=12) ○ Other's publicity (n=10) ○ Religion (n=3)

Theme: Polarization.

The “polarization” theme demonstrated a commonly recurring pattern of individuals taking sides in support of Carroll or United Airlines. Many responses falling under this theme sided with Carroll, and an additional motif emerging within was the idea of Carroll as “the little guy” or the everyman. Conversely, comments were coded if they expressed negative opinions regarding Carroll, United, or the airline industry as a larger representative unit.

Supportive/Approving toward Carroll. The most comments (n=143) were sorted into this code containing supportive and approving statements toward Carroll. To be expected, many individuals sided with Carroll and applauded the creation of his video and the message he was sending to a large corporation.

Some individuals’ comments focused primarily on their appreciation of his musical talents. For example, posts called the song “Pure Genius!” and “brilliant lyrics, dance-able song, memorable melody.” Another posted, “this is one of the greatest songs/videos I have ever heard/seen. I love it. This is great. I can’t stop watching it and laughing.” One individual lauded Carroll’s musical abilities as deserving of an award. “He deserves a GRAMMY for

this song,” the poster said, “and a BETTER GUITAR from United.” Additionally, those who posted to the site indicated that they had shared the musical bit with others: “I have to say this is the greatest video I have seen in a while ☺ I added it to my Facebook as well as my friends I do hope they continue to share it.”

Others referred to Carroll’s creative ability to take a bad situation and make something of it. “Sorry about the guitar but I love the song,” one individual noted. Another said, “I’m happy you turned a bad experience into creative inspiration!” Additionally, one individual lauded the creativity as a way to get back at United. “Awesome video – a musician tackling corporate! This made my day.”

Negative United. Given the large amount of supportive comments toward Carroll, it was logical that there would be a sizable amount of negative comments directed toward United. Often, the airline was criticized blatantly for customer service: “United really is a terrible airline. Their worst quality by far is their almost universally grumpy and indifferent service staff.” Others spoke to perceptions of the airline as problem-ridden and irresponsible, saying, “Everyone knows United is not a reliable airlines compared to others...” and simply, “United has serious issues.” Finally, those who presumably had prior bad luck with the airline remained unsurprised by United’s association in such a customer relations catastrophe, “This is great and sadly not unlike United; they are great at passing the buck.”

Negative airline industry. For some individuals, the video resonated as a commentary on the airline industry as a whole. After seeing the portrayal of United as an organization that did not attend to its customer appropriately, individuals would often lump those actions as identifying factors of the airline industry. Some even made the claim that there was nothing that could be done to change the industry and its practices: “I hope you win this case - but it

won't stop the airlines from sucking – it's an entrenched tradition.” Multiple people commented on a general disregard for passengers and luggage, claiming, “Airlines lately act like it's fine to lose or destroy our stuff and charge a fortune for each extra piece of luggage, it's insane,” and, “With every domestic airline (except Southwest)...I've watched customer service literally collapse over the years.”

Negative Carroll. Ten individuals directed negative comments toward Carroll, making claims about the quality of his music or alluding to the fact that it was his fault his guitar was damaged because of the way he traveled with it. A small contingent of individuals expressed distaste for Carroll's style of music, “Man, they should come to his house and break all his guitars. That guy shouldn't be allowed to make music,” and “Do something creative man...what crap r u singing????” Others mocked his intelligence, “YOU ARE AN IDIOT, TRULY AN IDIOT!”

Additionally, some comments opined that damage to the instrument came from Carroll mistreating it prior to his flight: “The guitar was totally abused for this type of damage to happen.”

Support United. Only six comments were made with positive remarks regarding United Airlines. Some people defended United as a good airline, and others said that it had seen the error in its ways and apologized appropriately. Said one individual, “They contact him, offer a settlement and then donate the money to a charity ... sounds to me like they know what they did wrong.” Another person defended United's guilt in the situation stating simply, “United is not liable.” General compliments were also given to the airline, such as “United is amazing,” however, it is unknown if those individuals genuinely supported United or posted similar comments to aggravate Carroll's supporters.

“Little guy.” Twenty-two comments discussed Carroll as someone “standing up for the little guy” or stuck in a “David and Goliath” scenario. The recurring motif of Carroll as the little guy painted him as a hero figure who finally got through to a big, unfeeling corporate giant, “Thanks for YouTube...now the little guy has a very good chance to shake the crap out of big arrogant businesses who give poor service and show lack of respect to the public...” Other comments referenced the biblical story succinctly: “Nothing better than a David and Goliath story.” Some were even more concise, “Little guy wins!”

Theme: Change of behavior.

Comments in the “change of behavior” theme indicated a statement or suggestion to change behaviors with regard to United Breaks Guitars. For example, many people claimed they would no longer fly United, or they would “boycott” the airline after watching the video. Others suggested changing airlines and listed other carriers that had provided better service in their opinion. Many made suggestions as to how United or Carroll *should* have changed their behavior to improve the outcome of the situation.

Shame on you. An interesting observation was the fact that many people pointed out what United and Carroll *should* have done, retrospectively. Split into two separate codes, these comments mainly pointed out what actions would have avoided the dilemma that led to United Breaks Guitars. It was an important differentiation to make from the negative-toned comments because while these may have appeared negative in nature, their content differed because they offered suggestions directly from the public’s perspective. For example, one comment that laid blame on Carroll made a recommendation about luggage storage, “He should have got an ATA approved guitar case.” Some individuals claimed that United could have acted differently in such a way that the crisis could have blown over, “I think United

should ignore that idea in this incident and Pay [Dave] for his guitar.” Other comments were more general and esoteric about what United “should” have done, “In this case, the airline or airport should have a good culture in place regarding luggage.”

Convinced not to fly United. Perhaps the worst comments that United executives could see are the proclamations that the video convinced someone never to fly United again. Many posts like this not only stated personal actions, but also encouraged others to “boycott” the airline and promised to spread the word, “I will NEVER fly united anymore...” Said another comment, “BOYCOTT UNITED AIRLINES!!!!” As such, others echoed similar feelings, albeit less vehemently, along with the hope that those feelings would spread, “I will never fly united, I hope the 2.5 million other people that have seen this video don't either.”

Interestingly, niche groups also emerged as a presence within this code, many of which sided with Carroll for one reason or another, “Speaking as a guitarist, I know now I will never fly United. This is all the reason I need!”

Suggest substitute airline/Preferred airline. Acknowledging the comments forum as a space to trade ideas, eight comments suggested substitute airlines to use instead of United. Most of the airlines suggested were many of United’s biggest competitors including Delta and American Airlines: “The crew of Delta is usually very accommodating as they know the guitar is expensive and somewhat delicate,” “I have switched to American. American isn’t great, but at least it doesn't piss me off as much.” Additionally, among the recommendations, people made specific references to carrying guitars: “I only like flying Jet Blue but i have no idea how they handle guitars.”

Therapeutic. Four comments made the claim that watching the video had a therapeutic effect in that the story made them happy and was uplifting. One person mentioned that

United Breaks Guitars literally lifted his or her spirit: “This is one of those things that if you are in a bad mood - watch this and you will no longer be in a bad mood.” Another comment alluded to the many happy reactions to the song, “It’s a smile maker for sure.”

Theme: Effectiveness of social media.

Codes falling under the theme about the “effectiveness of social media” specifically refer to the success of the video in appropriately delivering its message. In 47 comments, individuals discussed how effective the video was at revealing United’s allegedly flawed policies. Some individuals quoted the number of views as important markers, others discussed how the video potentially damages United’s reputation as being customer service driven.

Effective. Many people commented on the effectiveness of United Breaks Guitars, claiming that Carroll had accomplished his goal of revealing United’s flawed policy to a large audience. Specifically, people would provide evidence for effectiveness, such as the number of views at the time or personal stories about the publicity Carroll and the video were receiving, for example: “7 days...2574302 views wow!!!!” and “You are going to get another half million hits from that report. The show ripped United a new one for the way they treated you and other passengers with problems.” Other individuals expressed opinions that United Breaks Guitars had gotten Carroll’s point across successfully: “It certainly has done its damage,” “Hey brother, I think you did it all with just one song!” What’s more, even an individual working in the airline industry commented on the pervasiveness of the video, “Dave from a guy who works for an airline (and I hate it) your video has gotten all the way up to the CEO in all of the major airlines.”

Universal/Touched many people. From young children to individuals across the globe, the video appealed to many different people from various ages and backgrounds. Viewers came in the form of children in some cases, “This is our 3.5 year old son’s and 2.5 year old daughter’s favorite new song!” Additionally, the song was exceedingly popular outside of the U.S. as seen in statistics as well as user comments, “Definitely touched a collective nerve in USA and worldwide.”

United would have done nothing if not for video. One individual made the clear observation that had Carroll not used a publicly viewable medium such as a YouTube video, United would have continued to not compensate him for his broken guitar: “What would their response (still) be if not for this forum?”

Theme: Defining the crux of the problem.

The fourth theme of “defining the crux of the problem” relates to individuals teasing out a different core issue at the heart of the United Breaks Guitars conflict. For instance, some individuals claimed that the central issue was economic or monetary in nature, in which United was more concerned with losing money rather than their reputation. Other individuals maintained that this was an issue of politics or justice, and Carroll was getting revenge for the way he was treated by United employees.

Politics/Justice. An unexpected discussion emerged about political views with regard to United Breaks Guitars. While the video appears light-hearted in nature, individuals interpreted political undertones from the song. Political discussions seemingly unrelated to the song also spun off: “The republicans and gun-totting Americans with arrogant attitudes I cannot stand,” and, “Man I am so sick of people being politically correct. Give it a rest Mr. Perfect.” Further, to be expected, there was much talk of Carroll “getting justice” or revenge

for his poor treatment. Many individuals interpreted United Breaks Guitars as Carroll's attempt to get back and the organization for not compensating him for his guitar, "I LOVE this kind of justice," "This is the ultimate pay-back."

Economic/Money. Some comments discussed the United Breaks Guitars video in an economic context, claiming that Carroll had hit United in the pocketbook: "The one with the money got cheep...then got hammered by no money and lots of talent." Also, some comments equated power with money. One individual claimed: "At the end of the day, I realized justice is economic; unless you have enough money to properly mount an effective defense, you always lose." Even still, others maintained that the video would not matter if United provided the most inexpensive flight options: "You guys are all clowns. If United has the lowest price and at the time you want to fly, you will fly them anyway. All talk."

Theme: Alternate utility of comment forum.

Finally, the theme of user's "alternate utility of the comment forum" discusses the other ways that individuals used the space rather than just conversing about the video. Examples included people who posed questions about passenger rights on planes, or others who shared similar stories to Carroll's both on United flights or other carriers. Some used the space to post excerpts from news articles about United Breaks Guitars alluding to its continued success while others expressed an interest in more songs or products from Carroll.

Share similar stories. Some individuals used the comments forum as a space to share their own experiences, similar to that of Carroll traveling with his guitar. Split into two codes for stories specifically about United and for stories about other airlines, these comments sympathized with Carroll and discussed similar frustration. Many individuals were clear about how and what airline damaged their goods, "I once watched as an airline I won't

identify (it is the opposite of Southeast) dumped the entire contents of my luggage onto a wet tarmac in a pouring rain because they tried to throw it too far.” In addition to the fact that other passengers that were personally “wronged” by United, it seemed that time did not soften their sentiments: “About 15 years ago, I was flying United with some paintings that I was selling. Baggage handlers destroyed them all, making them not only unsellable, but the entire trip a waste of time. Compensation from? United? Nothing.”

Passenger rights. A few individuals utilized the comment forum as a place to ask about passenger rights. Mainly these comments asked for input from others who were communicating with one another using the comments section. Some comments ranged from general inquiries such as “Anyone suggest anything as my rights as a passenger?” to more specific: “Isn’t there some FAA regulation that mandates a passenger's baggage fly with that passenger?”

Want Carroll's products. Multiple comments expressed excitement and demand for Sons of Maxwell music, the next two installments of the United Breaks Guitars trilogy, as well as seeing Carroll perform in the mainstream media. Carroll’s fans had a presence in the comments: “Looking forward to new songs from you!” Other individuals heaped accolades on him: “Should be nominated by a Grammy + M-TV Award. Let this guy host Saturday Night Live, as he has a good sense of humor.” Some comments called for branded products: “Also I want a ‘United Breaks Guitars’ shirt to wear to the airport.” It should be noted that Carroll now produces and does distribute United Breaks Guitars t-shirts through his Web site.

Question/comment about video. Questions arose intermediately with regard to elements about the video and how it was made. Some people questioned the props and commented on actors: “They obviously had a broken Gibson that was used to make this. Why the heck are

you assuming they broke a guitar for the video?” One viewer found a particular actor attractive: “The first employee chick was the hottest, imo.”³

Post news. In many cases individuals would post excerpts from news articles about United Breaks Guitars and its success. Others discussed hearing it on local news channels or radio stations, “Just saw a report on CNN about this, and now United is all ‘Yes we want to make it right.’”

Observation: Tone of comments.

These themes related to the tone of the comments made in the categories described earlier. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, these themes show how individuals commented about the video and the situation that Carroll faced. Themes fell into five categories: emoticon/cyber language, humor, expletive, authoritative, and surprise/disbelief.

Emoticon/cyber-language. Many individuals used emoticons and other forms of cyber speech to convey their feelings and opinions toward United Breaks Guitars. Examples of emoticons were juxtapositions of punctuation marks to form symbols such as “:).” Other forms of cyber speech were abbreviations such as “lol” (laughing out loud) or “lmao” (laughing my ass off).

Humor. People who commented often made jokes and used sarcasm or wit to convey opinions about United. For example, one post played off a popular credit card commercial:

“Let’s see...Damage to Dave Carroll’s guitar... \$1,200
Time spent trying to get restitution \$Endless
Cost to Make the video.....\$300
Kicking United Ass \$PRICELESS!”

One comment referenced Carroll’s resemblance to an actor, “I didn’t know that Owen Wilson’s brother could sing like that...” Another individual implied that United would go to

³ “IMO” is common cyber speech translating to “in my opinion.”

great lengths to please Carroll after United Breaks Guitars, “Before this is over, United will be giving him a free airplane.”

Expletive. In expressing strong emotions regarding the video, individuals used expletives or abbreviations of expletives (such as the letter “F” representing “fuck”) to convey their feelings. Expletives were used 19 times, nine times in referring negatively to United and five times in responding negatively to Carroll. The expletive (or iteration thereof) that appeared the most frequently was “fuck,” For example, “‘F’ em I say!!!!” or “FUCK UNITED AIRLINES!!!!” Other individuals liberally used flagrant language to describe their views, “It’s about time that somebody exposes United Airlines for the criminals they are, for the bastards they are, and for the liars they are! Fuck United Airlines, they’re rotten to the core!” Some comments were more succinct: “I wouldn’t lay off those corporate bastards till i got what was mine.”

Authoritative. In response to the video, 33 comments used authoritative tones. Some posts were about values and the “golden rule,” “Keeping your nose clean and common sense win the day always.” Others defined concepts about the conflict, explained cultural attributes, and commented about the status of the industry as a whole. Said one Canadian viewer, “That’s how we protest and do things, with silly humor armed with a sharp bite to get the point across...but not enough to cause huge pain to anyone...That’s Canadian humor.” Many comments gave advice about issues such as properly stowing special luggage, “They have closets at the front of the plane that will fit large objects that can’t be checked.”

Surprise/disbelief. A few comments expressed feelings of surprise and disbelief after watching the video. One person even thought the video was a joke, “To frickin’ funny even if it was true.....” Another person simply responded with “Wow!”

Observation: Off-topic comments.

Additionally, many comments did not relate directly to the incident or the video. However, to show the impact of social media in creating a “wildfire,” off-topic themes are included. The popularity of the video drew in many viewers, many of whom began conversations and contributed general topics that were immaterial. It is important to note that during coding, I did not see any comments that appeared to prompt the off-topic comments. They appeared randomly and without provocation from other people’s comments. The fact that the video spawned so many of these unrelated conversations, in addition to discourse that *was* about United Breaks Guitars, reinforces the potential sprawling nature of a social media wildfire.

Religion. Three comments featured overtly religious tones and symbols. The comments did not address the video at all and appeared to be somewhat misplaced, for example: “The real reason that we cannot have the Ten Commandments posted in a courthouse is this: You cannot post ‘Thou Shall Not Steal,’ ‘Thou Shall Not Commit Adultery,’ and ‘Thou Shall Not Lie’ in a building full of lawyers, judges and politicians...It creates a hostile work environment.”

Others publicity. In an attempt to ride the coattails of the extremely popular video, many comments attempted to navigate users to other people’s videos or Web sites. Most comments of this nature directed viewers to other YouTube sites, “Check out my funny videos. And then comment or rate them,” or “SHOCKING similar FOOTAGE on my channel!”

Off-topic. Some comments simply had nothing to do with Carroll, United, or the video and were therefore labeled as off-topic. For example, “Rolling Stone has sway vote on who does or doesn't get into the so-called Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. Rolling Stone magazine

blows. Try a better read, like Spin,” and “Do NOT click, never ever on his profile. It is 100% junk, spam.”

Thematic Analysis of United's Response

After Carroll's posting of the video, United did not make an official statement using traditional media, (Greenfield, 2009) nor did it address the event on the company Web site or YouTube channel. According to its Web site, United lists that the only social media it participates in is the microblog Twitter (United Airlines Web site, 2009b). It lists no other microsites or social media sites to which it may have possibly posted a response. A fan page on Facebook does exist for United Airlines; however, it is assumed that it is an unofficial page, not created by the airline due to the fact that United does not mention the Facebook page on its main Web site, nor does its "profile" on Facebook make any posts to the page itself. In lieu of issuing a press release on its Web site or any official response method, United instead relied on its Twitter feed to respond to United Breaks Guitars and answered reporter inquiries. To that end, the text that was analyzed comes from United's "tweets" as well as the direct and indirect quotations published in Internet news articles and blogs.

Numerous texts were evaluated in ascertaining United's response to Carroll's video. It is important to keep in mind that given the nature of social media, there is a tendency to repeat or repost information. As a result, many of the responses found consisted of repeated facts located within different sources and on various Web sites.

"It struck a chord."

United's most-cited response to Song 1 of United Breaks Guitars was its initial message on Twitter, dated July 7, 2009, more than 12 hours following the post of the video:

"@Kelly_MacD This has struck a chord w/ us and we've contacted him directly to make it right" (UnitedAirlines, 2009a). Countless blog posts and news articles covering the video included either excerpts from this initial tweet or the entire entry (Ashley, 2009; CBC News, 2009; Fisher, 2009; Flight Wisdom, 2009; Geddie, 2010; Jackson, 2009; Johnsson, 2009a;

Kleinberg, 2009; Synder, 2009; Walters & Walker, 2009). Roughly three hours later, a second tweet directed toward a different Twitter user reprised the same message:

“@tinamack This has struck a chord w/ us and we’ve contacted him directly to make it right” (UnitedAirlines, 2009d). United would tweet 10 more times during the next seven days in regard to Carroll and its efforts in making amends (see Table 3). In its final tweet regarding United Breaks Guitars, UA expressed concern for potential victims of similar luggage damage, “@HalifaxMagazine Should it regretfully happen to anyone, pls file a claim w/in 24hrs at airport, online or phone” (UnitedAirlines, 2009l).

Not all reactions to the songs from United showed feelings of concern, however. Shortly after Song 2 was posted, United spokeswoman Robin Urbanski left a comment following an August 18 blog post on travel expert Christopher Elliott’s blog showing little sincerity toward Carroll’s situation, “He has made his point, we have since worked with him directly to fix ... While his anecdotal experience is unfortunate, the fact is that 99.95 percent of our customers’ bags are delivered on-time and without incident, including instruments that belong to many Grammy award-winning musicians” (Elliott, 2009b, para. 10). While the comment comes after Song 2, the repercussions allude to messages and damage caused in the wake of Song 1.

“We donated 3K to charity.”

The airline made multiple attempts to atone for United Breaks Guitars by trying to compensate for their actions. The most-salient examples occurred on two occasions after the video went viral: when the airline offered to reimburse Carroll for damages and when it made a charitable donation, per his request. Only *after* the video went viral did United reach out to reimburse Carroll for his guitar (Carroll, personal communication, February 15, 2010).

United's followers were first alerted via Twitter when the organization made a charitable donation of \$3,000 to the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz at Carroll's suggestion. This occurred after he refused to accept any monetary rewards given that the matter had long since been closed by United (Walker, 2009). UA replied to two separate inquiries about remediation with the following tweets, both on July 10, 2009: "Wud like Dave 2 sing a happy tune – as asked we gave 3K to Thelonius Monk Institute of Jazz 4 music education 4 kids" (UnitedAirlines, 2009g) and "@pcgailc As Dave asked we donated 3K to charity and selected the Thelonius Monk Institute of Jazz 4 music education 4 kids" (UnitedAirlines, 2009i). In an effort to rectify the situation, a customer service representative also contacted Carroll to offer \$1,200 for guitar repairs and a matching amount in flight vouchers (Bliss, 2009).

Table 3 <i>The tweets from United Airlines relating to United Breaks Guitars and Dave Carroll.</i>	
Date and time	@UnitedAirlines' Twitter posts
July 7, 2009 2:21 p.m.	@Kelly_MacD This has struck a chord w/ us and we've contacted him directly to make it right. (UnitedAirlines, 2009a)
July 7, 2009 2:49 p.m.	@rockitdev Love your client's video. Not all r as honest as he. That is why policy asks for claims w/in 24 hours. No excuse; we're sorry. (UnitedAirlines, 2009b)
July 7, 2009 4:31 p.m.	@Kelly_MacD The word you hear is wrong. We have called him and the person who answered his phone scheduled a call for tomorrow morning. (UnitedAirlines, 2009c)
July 7, 2009 5:25 p.m.	@tinamack This has struck a chord w/ us and we've contacted him directly to make it right. (UnitedAirlines, 2009d)
July 8, 2009 4:02 p.m.	@JRGarcia It is excellent and that is why we would like to use it for training purposes so everyone receives better service from us. (UnitedAirlines, 2009e)
July 9, 2009 6:59 p.m.	@ryanhoover Absolutely right, and 4 that (among other things), we are v. sorry and are making it right. Plan 2 use video in training. (UnitedAirlines, 2009f)
July 10, 2009 5:44 p.m.	Wud like Dave 2 sing a happy tune – as asked we gave 3K to Thelonius Monk Institute of Jazz 4 music education 4 kids. (UnitedAirlines, 2009g)
July 10, 2009 5:46 p.m.	Can't wait 2 make music w/Dave 2 improve service 4 all. (UnitedAirlines, 2009h)
July 10, 2009 9:13 p.m.	@pcgailc As Dave asked we donated 3K to charity and selected the Thelonius Monk Institute of Jazz 4 music education 4 kids (UnitedAirlines, 2009i)
July 13, 2009 2:56 p.m.	@HalifaxMagazine It should have been fixed sooner & not have happened in the 1st place. Video will be used for training. (UnitedAirlines, 2009j)
July 13, 2009 5:45 p.m.	@jtkola Nope. That was a mistake that we made, have apologized for, have fixed, and most importantly, learned from too. (UnitedAirlines, 2009k)
July 14, 2009 10:24 a.m.	@HalifaxMagazine Should it regretfully happen to anyone, pls file a claim w/in 24hrs at airport, online or phone. (UnitedAirlines, 2009l)

“We should have done a better job.”

In replying to reporter inquiries shortly after the video hit, Urbanski spoke directly to the repercussions of the video, “While we mutually agree this should have been fixed much sooner, Dave’s excellent video provides us with something we can use for training purposes to ensure that all customers receive better service from us” (Mutzabaugh, 2009). In one interview, United’s vice president of customer contact centers, Barbara Higgins, spoke

clearly as to what the airline should have done to avoid the United Breaks Guitars incident:

We could have done a better job helping him report the damage when he first noticed it being mishandled, or immediately when it was discovered, which would have enabled the claim to be resolved promptly. That's the premise of how we will use this incident for training ... that it's all of our jobs to ensure our guests are taken care of. (Elliott, 2009, para. 4)

In a statement issued by United during Carroll's appearance on the popular television program *The View*, it maintained that Carroll's claim "should have been fixed much sooner" (Walters & Geddie, 2010).

On its Twitter feed, United addressed the situation expressing regret in two separate tweets. On July 7, the day following the posting of Song 1, United tweeted that there was "no excuse" for the negligence shown to Carroll and his broken guitar (UnitedAirlines, 2009b). In another tweet on July 13, United reiterated Urbanski's message to Halifax Magazine that "It should have been fixed sooner & not have happened in the 1st place" (UnitedAirlines, 2009j).

To reassure customers and their audience that United was taking actions to avoid similar incidents in the future, it often coupled regretful responses with resolutions to make policy changes to help curb the problem. As such, many articles mentioned United's desire to make serious internal changes such as using United Breaks Guitars to train employees, "[Carroll] even won praise from United, which asked [him] if it can use the video to help change its culture" (Johnsson, 2009a). In addition to mentions in the media (Flight Wisdom, 2009; Jackson, 2009; Mutzabaugh, 2009; Palmeri, 2009; Wheeler, 2009), the plan to utilize the video for training was brought up by United in three tweets as well (UnitedAirlines, 2009e, f, j.).

Perhaps the clearest expression of United's efforts to change its ways was seen Elliott's (2009a) interview with vice president Higgins on his popular blog in which she expounded upon and reaffirmed the similar talking points United previously made in other communications with the media. With regard to changing internal policies, she told Elliott that claims agents now have a revamped procedure allowing them to be "more responsive to special situations that arise" (para. 14). She also discussed in detail how United should have handled Carroll's claim, while making the point that the 24-hour claim policy is in place to protect the company from fraud.

In the wake of the United Breaks Guitars video, United also appears to have made concerted efforts in responding with more alacrity to social media queries. One blogger recounted a tweet he directed at United Airlines on Twitter regarding his preference for United Breaks Guitars Song 2. Less than one hour later, he received a message on Twitter directing him to check his e-mail. United had in fact sent him a message addressing the issue of United Breaks Guitars and their continuing efforts to make amends (Snyder, 2009).

99.95% of bags arrive without incident.

United relied on positivity and praise in many of its responses to Carroll's video. For example, Urbanski reinforced United's impressive baggage statistics, emphasizing that Carroll's broken guitar was an anomaly given that 99.95% of luggage on United arrives safely and undamaged (Cosh, 2009). She not only stated this point in an article with Canada's *National Post*, but also posted two comments beneath the article responding to other readers' questions. One comment supported the infrequency of damaged luggage and hit many of the other talking points United stood by throughout the crisis: "What regrettably happened was an anomaly, not the norm, and was an unintentional accident for which we are

very sorry :(Any bag lost or damaged is one too many,” (Urbanski, Msg 1, 2009). The second comment made reference to United’s new policy on how comparable baggage claims will be handled (Urbanski, Msg 10, 2009).

Similarly, Higgins addressed the high volume of successful baggage arrivals in her interview with Elliott, also praising the work of United employees in accomplishing their high rate of success (2009):

I think people would be amazed at our track record in which more than 99.95 percent of our guests’ bags are delivered on-time and with no damage whatsoever. That’s like three to four bags every 100,000 guests. Of course any bag lost or damaged is one too many, but clearly our employees do great work safely transporting thousands of checked bags, including guitars, tubas and drums that belong to many Grammy award-winning musicians. (para. 2)

United also praised Carroll for his integrity and intelligence. On Twitter it responded to one user claiming that it “loved” the video and that “not all r as honest as he” (UnitedAirlines, 2009b). Urbanski was also quoted as saying the video was “excellent” (Mutzabaugh, 2009; Wheeler, 2009).

“It was a mistake.”

United’s responses to Carroll’s video make mentions of issuing apologies. An apology is when an organization accepts full responsibility for the crisis and asks for forgiveness (Coombs, 1995). In its tweets, United stated twice in two separate tweets that it was “sorry” (UnitedAirlines, 2009b; 2009f). It also reported that representatives had apologized to Carroll and also that “it was a mistake that we made” (UnitedAirlines, 2009k). In statements to the media, United reiterated similar messages from its tweets. *The Toronto Sun* quoted United spokesperson Urbanski’s stance, “We are in conversations with (Carroll) to make what happened right (Walker, 2009).”

Results of Carroll's Interview

In the months since his posting of United Breaks Guitars Song 1 (see Appendix II for the song's lyrics), Carroll became a commonly recognized ambassador for passenger rights and customer service. The notoriety of his YouTube songs launched him into the public spotlight and as a result, he has received accolades for his now infamous response to United after his guitar was damaged by the airline. *Time* magazine named United Breaks Guitars Song 1 as No. 7 of the top-10 viral videos of 2009 (Fletcher, 2009). YouTube included the video in a year-end celebration of the 31 best videos of 2009, airing one video each day during the month of December (YouTube, 2009). Carroll even spoke and performed at a passenger rights hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. (McGee, 2009). Given his increased exposure and interaction with viewers of his video as well as United executives, Carroll vocalized his experiences in an in-depth interview conducted on February 15, 2010, about the making of United Breaks Guitars, describing in his opinion why the video went viral, what United did to perpetuate his message, and what his message is moving forward. Each of these three areas is presented in the following sections. This chapter provides background information that led up to Carroll's creation of the United Breaks Guitars video, and his critique of their actions.

Why United Breaks Guitars took off.

According to its creator, United Breaks Guitars was a viral success primarily because of its function as a "memory jogger." In other words, due to the universality of the experience of lost or damaged luggage, coupled with many passengers' complaints of insincerity displayed by airlines, United Breaks Guitars became a video that millions of people could

relate to in any part of the world, at any age, profession, or income bracket:

United Breaks Guitars is a memory jogger for people that have had bad airline experiences. So they see it, they laugh at it, and it immediately makes them want to *tell* friends or talk about their own experiences *to* their friends. I have musician friends who said they were about to start a rehearsal, and someone brought it up, and three hours later they hadn't played a note. They'd all been talking about their airline stories because of that. And that's been happening around the world.

Carroll has been inundated with e-mails from thousands of individuals with similar cases of damaged goods. Even members of the 1970s folk band America shared stories with Carroll at a recent concert in Halifax, Nova Scotia where he was asked to come backstage, "I went back and they totally knew everything about the story," Carroll said. "They've been in business 40 years as a band so they've got all sorts of broken-guitar stories." United employees, many of whom disclosed to Carroll their personal struggles about the airline's deflated retirement accounts and unresolved pension questions, led him to believe that a basic neglect of both employees and customers was another galvanizing effect of his video. Amidst the recent downturned economic climate in which executives are still receiving high-paying bonuses, Carroll believed that Song 1 was even more meaningful: "I think we're at a time when people are upset and sick of corporate greed and disrespect and everyone's been cutting their overhead and raising the bottom line to the point that employees are getting frustrated." Thus, Carroll felt that in a sense, United Breaks Guitars became a hot-button issue for many individuals who saw the video.

In addition to people's ability to sympathize with the situation described in United Breaks Guitars, Carroll also ascribed importance to the use of humor in the video as a contributing factor to its success. Carroll clearly stated that once the matter had been closed by the last United employee, Marianne Irlweg, he harbored no anger toward the company. "It was like a weight lifted off my shoulders," he said. "I was like, 'Okay, now I'm not fighting anymore.

There is nothing to fight about.’ But what can I do to make up for all the time I’ve put into this thing?’” While thinking out the plan of his video, he opted for humor which he felt would attract a great number of people to watch the video, rather than a confrontational piece. “If you stand on a mountain top and bitch and complain, you’ll [only] draw in a few people that can relate to you,” he said. “Humor, humor was huge.”

Nevertheless the lighthearted tone of the video did not dilute the quality of the production that Carroll strove to keep professional. “My goal for this was to make something that would look good, sound good, and would make people want to tell their friends about it,” Carroll said. “I approached it like it was a serious, commercial song.” He took time to create lyrics that made sense and flowed, enlisting a “top-notch” group of players for the recording. To complement the song, Carroll asked friends at Curve Productions in Halifax to create the video with a mood of lightheartedness that paid homage to well-known 1950s country/western musician Marty Robbins. With connections to other musicians, the high-quality production group, and hundreds of volunteer extras, he only incurred a total cost of \$150. Yet, Carroll believed the energy exuded by volunteers during shooting added to the success of the video’s production, “The reason everyone volunteered for that is because they laughed when they heard the song,” he said. “They thought, ‘Yeah, that would be a funny video to make. I’m going to come, and I’m going to spend a day of my time doing this.’”

Perhaps the most-ironic twist of the viral success of United Breaks Guitars is that Carroll described himself as being a novice when it comes to social media. In fact, he stated that his decision to create three videos and implement YouTube as a medium for distribution was completely arbitrary. “I’ve never really been into social media. I didn’t devise a plan and say ‘Based on my research, this is what’s out there,’” he said. Writing a song, however, was a

logical first step. “I’ve told people that if I were a lawyer, I would have sued. But I’m a songwriter,” he said. “I know music and I know what’s gotten a reaction.”

United’s missteps.

Ever since July 7, 2009, the day following the posting of Song 1, United Airlines has made multiple attempts to reconcile the matter with Dave Carroll through attempts to repay him for damages and make charitable donations in his name. As a result, Carroll has had many conference calls and meetings with United’s public relations team as well as a number of executives in their Chicago headquarters. After his dealings with United both before and after Song 1, keeping in mind that the airline only offered remediation after United Breaks Guitars became popular, Carroll’s sentiments toward the airline are apathetic. “Their whole brand, to me, is an old company that’s trying to stay fresh, and they have some ways to go,” he said. “I think it’s diminished.” Additionally, he described the company as a corporate giant that is out of touch with its customers. Contributing to the problem, Carroll said, is that United is “run by old-school CEOs [and] dinosaurs,” who possess the knowledge of the airline as industry veterans with dedicated careers in the field, but lack the awareness of technology and the catastrophic impact of social media on a company’s reputation.

In appraising the situation from the beginning, however, Carroll believed United’s first mistake was not taking the joke. “If you want people to stop laughing you have to laugh at yourself first and then change. Those two things never happened,” he said, “not even one of them.” Next, he suggested that United should have considered the implementation of a special guitar policy that may have taken the focus off “the poor musician from Canada that had his guitar broken.” Said Carroll, “The thing would have been to laugh at it and say

‘Yeah, that was a funny video, and we’re going to change our policy on guitars,’ ... It would have downplayed the whole thing.”

Carroll also believed that United would not have come under as much fire had they presented a more-tactful reply. In his opinion, it was clear by the timing of its response that United only cared about his situation once his song made headlines. That fact was obvious not only to Carroll but also the audience that watched his video, which did not present a positive picture of the company. As such, he maintained that United should have offered him compensation or some sort of reimbursement during their nine-month correspondence prior to Song 1.

Their responses were so obviously motivated by the fact that there was a viral video ... I’m the kind of guy that probably would have taken some kind of a handout because I don’t like confrontation, if you can believe that. But I’m also the type of guy that once I say I’m going to do something – I’m crazy that way – but I’ll follow through.

Carroll also suggested that had he been in the shoes of United’s PR team when the video hit, he would have issued a response video on YouTube. “I would have picked the form that was doing the damage and stand up and answer to it instead of going silent. It’s the worst thing you can do,” he said. Had the company proceeded with a YouTube response, Carroll thought that it could have “watered down the effectiveness” of the video by “taking it on the chin right away.”

Furthermore, Carroll believed that United was not strategic about its reaction to the video, given that the organization relied heavily on its Twitter feed and no other social media tools to respond to United Breaks Guitars:

The sense I got was that they knew less about social media than I did at the time. And so they were like ‘Well, people are getting on Twitter, so we’ll be on Twitter and we’ll say something on Twitter and it’ll go away.’ I don’t know if they had a real understanding and a plan.

In Carroll's opinion, successful social media communicators incorporate multiple tools (such as pairing Twitter and Facebook) to engage people for the purpose of a higher impact. He claimed that United did not do that, instead relying on Twitter as a fad rather than choosing it as the most- appropriate method for communication with its customers.

Another weakness on United's part, according to Carroll, stemmed from a general lack regard for its customers. In his opinion, the crux of the United Breaks Guitars crisis was poor customer service and that United's public relations efforts were merely a band-aid, masking the problem but not necessarily fixing it. "This didn't happen because of a rogue incident, and the problem, I think, with the company is that's the short fix: to find a PR person who can shut people down," he said. Carroll recalled a meeting he had with three vice presidents at United in September 2009, and how he still sensed a lack of regard for the customer even then, three months after Song 1 went viral. "One of the things that [vice president] Barbara Higgins talked about in the meeting was that they have three goals and none of them were to improve customer service," he said. Those three goals included having on-time flights, comfortable seats, and courteous service – all elements he felt should already be mandatory at any airline. Carroll also recalled that the meeting in September was the first time that United directly apologized to him.

Finally, Carroll conceded that creation of United Breaks Guitars was a last resort that he was pushed to after the matter was closed:

It occurred to me after I had done everything they'd asked, gone through all the customer service hoops they asked me to jump through, and they shut things down. And that's key to this. They are the ones who forced this issue. I would have kept going had they said, 'Well, call us back or whatever,' but they said, 'No,' so I thought, 'Well, I have no hope left. This is a done deal. I've had to spend this money so what are my options now?'

The details of his story and how his claim was handled by United was never questioned by the airline. He described his actions as “fair” and “reasonable,” doing everything to come to a rational end before deciding to create the songs. He claimed that his frustration was more about United’s faulty policies, and not as much relating to its employees. In fact, the most-significant negative response to his video came from United employee, Marianne Irlweg who Carroll refers to in Song 1 as “kind Ms. Irlweg.” Carroll was told by United representatives that Irlweg disliked the attention received from the videos, despite Carroll’s intention to portray her positively. “I think I’ve shown the type of person that I am. I have nothing against her. I’ve been great to her,” he said. He feels his message still resonated, however, stating that viewer feedback commending him on his respectful portrayal of Irlweg reassured him that his point came across, a fact that allows him “to sleep at night,” he said.

Moving forward.

In the wake of United Breaks Guitars, Carroll received thousands of e-mails from other individuals who had experienced similar customer-service issues, many unrelated to the airline industry. These correspondences formed the nexus for two of his new endeavors, a pair of Web sites addressing some of the common concerns individuals expressed to him since United Breaks Guitars went viral. Many individuals have contacted Carroll asking him to create similar videos, from a man in Shanghai who wanted a song about his estranged wife to an organization promoting local television in Canada. As a result, Carroll has launched Big Break Solutions (<http://bigbreaksolutions.com>), a business to provide his services, including the creation of songs and videos, in addition to acting as a public speaker and live performer.

In his second project, Carroll launched a social media site of sorts called The Right Side of Right (<http://rightsideofright.com>). While the site is not marketed as a traditional social

media site like Facebook or MySpace, it is place for people to communicate and make connections online. The site is an online space for individuals with both good and bad customer service experiences to connect with organizations that offer customer-central solutions. “I want to do something that is not harping about my experience but giving people the chance to come together with a purpose at the end rather than complaining,” he said. The mission statement is “to make the world better, one experience at a time.”

While Carroll encourages other individuals facing customer service frustration to air their grievances, he only advocates actions that are fair, telling them:

Don't embellish, be truthful and be creative. It's not about bringing down a company because I'm a capitalist. I believe in profit, and there's nothing wrong with that, but I also believe in supporting the people that keep you in business for no other reason than because it makes common sense to do it.

Carroll recalled that his most-meaningful interactions with viewers of United Breaks Guitars were the people who told him that the video inspired them to make a change, not to “get even.” “When they say that the song has given them, has proved to them, that anybody can have an impact and that everyone's voice matters,” he said. Stories such as these were the basis for the new Web site.

Chapter V: Discussion

This chapter analyzes the collected results and applies it to find solutions to the three research questions guiding this study. To reiterate, those research questions asked:

- (a) How the public's response to United Breaks Guitars constituted a social media wildfire,
- (b) How United responded to the video and the reactions to those responses, and
- (c) What the implications were for public relations managers when formulating crisis communication plans.

To address the first question, I will apply the results from the YouTube comments beneath Song 1 demonstrating how the public's response translated in a social media wildfire. The meanings associated with the five significant themes that surfaced during coding – change of behavior, polarization, effectiveness of social media, defining the crux of the problem, and alternate utility of comment forum – will be examined for their qualities that ignited the “wildfire.” The two observational categories also were incorporated into the analysis given their presence was significant in identifying the phenomenon as well.

Second, the results from the thematic analysis of United's response to United Breaks Guitars were applied to ascertain the general response to the organization's communications during the crisis. Particularly, I looked at how its actions were interpreted by other YouTube viewers and the media. I will also discuss how United's traditional responses, seemingly based on Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 1995), were not helpful in mitigating the effects of this crisis and therefore revealing areas where the theory is arguably

obsolete. In examining United's response to Song 1, it is clear that it used traditional crisis communication strategies recommended by SCCT. Its reactions to the guitar incident, documented by its Twitter feed and responses to media inquiries, can clearly be categorized into SCCT's deal response strategies of concern, compassion, regret, ingratiation, and apology (previously explored in Chapter I). The negative impact of United Breaks Guitars on United's reputation, despite its implementation of traditional crisis response strategies, emphasizes the need for an improved method of response.

Finally, the results of the research and its analysis were examined broadly to identify what public relations practitioners must do to prevent a social media wildfire from spreading. To do this, I will compare successful accounts of wildfires that have been "put out" alongside the timeline of United Breaks Guitars. In juxtaposing the success stories with the analysis of the guitar crisis provided by this study, important distinctions will be identified that will be vital for public relations practitioners to implement into their current crisis communications plans.

How YouTube Comments Fanned the Flames

The first phase of the data collection consisted of a content analysis based on a sample of comments found underneath Song 1, posted on the Web site YouTube. A total of 378 comments were coded and broadly categorized into five themes: change of behavior, polarization, effectiveness of social media, defining the crux of the problem, and alternate utility of comment forum. Each of these themes and the codes that comprise them suggest specific meanings that individuals associated with the players in United Breaks Guitars. Given that individuals act toward things based on meanings they have previously formed (Blumer, 1969), it is unclear in some scenarios if the social media wildfire encircling United

Breaks Guitars resulted in the formulation of new meaning. In many examples, however, it is clear that meaning changed because of Carroll's song. While an individual's deliberate change of meaning is obviously valuable to note, the pre-established meaning remains a significant snapshot as well, revealing important details about the audience.

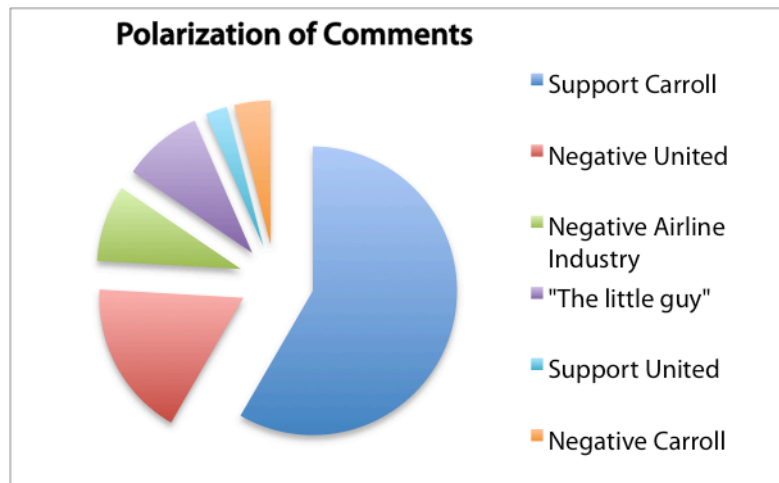
The clearest display of distinctive meanings associated with the parties of United Breaks Guitars is seen in the polarization theme, in which 65% of individuals in the sample took sides with the various players involved in the crisis (see Figure 2). In the category, 58% sided with Carroll and left him supportive and

approving comments. More than 17% of comments made negative statements about United while 8% blamed the airline industry for being insensitive and unfair. Only 3% of comments expressed negative perceptions of Carroll, criticizing his music or his

character, and roughly 2.5% of comments in this category supported United. Another meaningful caveat emerging from the polarization theme is the perception of Carroll as the "little guy." Nearly 9% of comments referred to Carroll as an everyman, giving a voice to other victims, in a current-day David and Goliath story.

In examining the overwhelming support directed toward Carroll, it is clear that many individuals associated him with a justified, clever, moral figure with whom they could compare themselves. His story resonated with them; United's story did not. To his

Figure 2: Polarization of Comments



supporters, Carroll was viewed as someone who stood up for the rights of all passengers, in a polite, non-confrontational way, and actually got through to a large corporation. The perceptions of United were, in essence, the polar opposite. Repetitive mentions of negative customer service experiences and refusing to be held accountable for disputes, painted them as an unfeeling, poorly run organization with “serious issues.” What’s more, individuals made snobbish references to United executives describing them as business-school types, ignoring the real problems, locked away in their corner offices. Thus, it can be deduced that to audiences, Carroll was a figure that most related to, while United was an organization that refused to be personal and understanding.

Another category displaying significant meanings was the change of behavior theme, which included statements or suggestions related to behavior change among the main players in United Breaks Guitars. Nearly 17% of comments in this category claimed that an individual was convinced not to fly United after watching Song 1. These statements indicated a clear shifting of preference, signifying that those individuals now possessed negative perceptions of the airline, enough to avoid patronizing it. Another 14% of comments in this category were part of a code called “shame on United,” in which individuals indicated that United failed to take all the precautions it could have to avoid the social media wildfire. As such, these comments indicated that the crisis responsibility resides with the airline, a potentially disastrous accusation as higher crisis responsibility leads to negative images of an organization and eventually, less interaction with it (Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988). Only seven comments indicated that Carroll was responsible or partly responsible for his broken guitar. Many comments like those delegating crisis responsibility or indicating a distaste for United (strong enough not to fly the airline) displayed individuals’ attitudes about

the guitar situation. It is relevant to note that attitude does not always predict behavior but the stronger the attitude, the greater the predictability of behavior (Brock & Green, 2005). So, for example, while people may have said they would not fly United based on their attitude about United's actions, they may have not actually stopped using it as a carrier.

The theme of defining the crux of the problem provided additional insight into what publics identified as the central issue with United Breaks Guitars. In particular, two ideas informed this theme: the idea of (a) politics/justice as the root cause and (b) economics/money. While only 7% of the total comments recognized these separate causes, their identification provided insight into how many people inductively reasoned this specific event to be an issue of a grander scale. For example, while Carroll made it clear that his intention to create the video was largely to inform other flyers (Carroll, personal communication, February 15, 2010), 77% of individuals in this category claimed this crisis was about getting vindication and justice for what happened. To them, the point of creating a video like United Breaks Guitars was about getting even instead of moving forward. This interpretation becomes problematic because other individuals may attempt to use viral videos to "get even" with a company, rather than simply reporting the facts about an exchange. Carroll also stated that once the matter was closed, he did not want any type of remediation and later refused to accept anything because he said remuneration was not the point of creating the video. The fact that Carroll refused compensation after the fact directly contradicts other people's perceptions that his goal was getting even.

Additionally, a small contingent of individuals (six comments) reported that the United Breaks Guitars crisis boiled down to an issue of money. Some individuals equated money with power and the idea of possessing less money than a counterpart as a losing battle. One

commenter even went so far as to refer to United as simply “the one with the money,” no longer an airline but a generic, identity-less entity.

Some themes were not as much related to meanings about United Breaks Guitars, but rather understanding the medium Carroll used to deliver the message. More than 12% of comments made mention of the effectiveness of social media in general. Within that category, 79% of individuals remarked at how Carroll’s use of a song and video was an effective way of spreading his message. They expressed this opinion by giving total numbers of views at the time of their comment, claiming that “it certainly has done it’s [sic] damage,” and also mentioned that other airline CEOs are taking notice. Those individuals who commented about effectiveness may or may not have believed in the capability of viral videos like United Breaks Guitars. Nevertheless, in making these statements and thereby acknowledging the success of the video, it can be said that the meaning associated with social media now triggers different images to some audience members that might not have known or believed a viral video could be so influential and well-received so quickly.

Along the same lines as the effectiveness category, a significant number of viewers also chose alternate utilities of the comment forum thereby forming or strengthening new meanings for the use of the online space Song 1 occupied. For nearly 22% of audience members, United Breaks Guitars’ unique YouTube site was a space to commiserate with others whose luggage was lost or damaged, a page to request Carroll’s products and music, and even a forum for posing questions about passenger rights. Additional viewers even used the Web site as a bulletin board to post excerpts from traditional news stories about United Breaks Guitars. It is impossible to know if people in this category have always had an alternate use of YouTube comment sections; regardless, it is significant that those new uses

of the site are present because they dig deeper into each audience members' interpretation of United Breaks Guitars. For these individuals, the comment space is not simply a place for things to be said; instead there is an expectation of two-way conversation. For them, social media are no longer something to be viewed but something personal in which they now have a stake.

The five central themes recognized in the YouTube comments exemplify the formulation and establishment of meanings, which is one imperative, identifying factor of a social media wildfire. Another element of a social media wildfire is the chaotic, out-of-control, unruly dynamic of the conversation in a given social media space. Various elements both related and unrelated to the content on the site stimulate and antagonize responses from more individuals, thus contributing to the viral nature of the phenomenon. In the case of United Breaks Guitars, both the off-topic comments as well as those that varied in tone contributed to the boisterous mood of conversation, comparable to a large rally or town hall meeting where many people are speaking at once. In addition to the polarization of individuals who sided with certain parties involved in the guitar crisis, many people's tone contributed to the collision of different voices and opinions. For example, some audience members used humor to express opinions about the guitar crisis, while others spoke passionately, using expletives or variations of expletives. Some showed surprise or disbelief at the situation as a whole, while presumably more computer-savvy users expressed their opinions using emoticons and cyber language such as “:)” or “lol” (“laughing out loud”). A considerable number of users had a more-serious approach, speaking authoritatively in their comments, bestowing advice, explaining cultural nuances, or defining terminology. The variation in tone not only indicated the presence of many differing opinions swirling around the video, but also the differing

interpretations and responses as well. Occasional comments spawned disagreements, some of which became so heated that arguments exploded into personal attacks, completely devoid of relevance to the video.

In that vein, a number of comments were simply off-topic, unrelated to any aspect of United Breaks Guitars. Again, the presence of off-topic commentary is another key factor in a social media wildfire. These comments are worth examining because of their utility in the phenomenon. Social media are very much two-way forms of communication. While off-topic comments are inevitable and may fail to add value to the message of the content, they still continue the conversation, figuratively keeping the wildfire ablaze. Therefore, while off-topic comments are mostly devoid of value, they still serve a purpose in drawing more people to the conversation.

The Reaction to United's Response

As a whole, the reaction to United's response following the launch of United Breaks Guitars varied among different audiences. In reexamining the comments under the video, it is clear that given the unbalanced ratio of supportive comments toward Carroll versus those toward United, 38% compared to 1.5% of total comments, respectively, there is a heavy favoritism toward Carroll among the public who watched the video on YouTube.

Nevertheless, few comments spoke specifically to United's actions after the video. Of the few that did address United's response, one person claimed "They contact him, offer a settlement and then donate the money to a charity....Sounds to me like they know what they did wrong." Some stated that United was simply not liable. Others comments coded as "shame on United," stated that the airline should have just ignored the incident and paid Carroll. Given the fact that United did not post a response video on YouTube, it could be

assumed that many audience members never actually saw the airline's retorts on Twitter and in the mainstream media. Coupled with the fact that United never questioned Carroll's story, many audience members may have interpreted their response as going silent. These presumptions may explain the mostly negative reception from general public.

The wildfire raging online quickly got the attention of the mainstream media that reported on the incident. While many articles about Song 1 also included United's initial tweet about "striking a chord," there was little coverage of United's subsequent efforts of remediation such as its \$3,000 donation to the music charity made on Carroll's suggestion. *Fast Company* magazine did describe the action as "way too little and too late to stop the viral spread of the story" (Sawhney, 2009). More than three days separated the posting of the video and United's donation and by then *The Wall Street Journal* (McCartney, 2009), *USA Today* (Mutzabaugh, 2009), *ABC News* (Fisher, 2009), and *CNN* (gerrior99, 2009) had all reported on the story. In the 24-hour news cycle, three days is an eternity, which may explain the reason for less coverage of United's efforts to apologize.

In evaluating United's responses, the results suggest that it used a number of common crisis response strategies when it reacted to the success of Carroll's video, many of which included the ideal response strategies outlined in Situational Crisis Communication Theory. For example, the strategy of showing concern was evident in United's initial tweet, which became its most-cited response in the entire United Breaks Guitars crisis: "This has struck a chord w/ us and we've contacted him directly to make it right" (UnitedAirlines, 2009a). According to Coombs (1995), concern occurs when an organization expresses worry toward victims. Situational Crisis Communication Theory also offers the crisis response strategy of compassion that United displayed not only in tweets, but also in other reporter inquiries.

Compassion is described as an occasion when an organization offers money and products as compensation after a crisis hits (Coombs, 1995). Perhaps United's most-compassionate actions were when it finally offered to reimburse Carroll for damage to his guitar and when it took his advice to made a charitable donation to a music philanthropy.

Further, United did not deny the events of Carroll's story and echoed sentiments of regret in its response to Song 1. Regret is when the organization expresses that it feels bad about the crisis and that the crisis event occurred (Coombs, 1995). United showed regret when multiple spokespeople made statements admitting that the airline should have done a better job to fix the problem sooner and respond more effectively when Carroll reported the damage initially. The crisis response strategy of ingratiation, defined as an opportunity for the organization to praise stakeholders and/or remind them of past good works by the organization (Coombs, 1995), was also an evident theme in the airlines' responses. United employed this tactic a number of times, particularly when referring to the low occurrence of luggage that is actually damaged by the airline. Finally, United mentioned that it made apologies for United Breaks Guitars on multiple occasions, using the word "sorry" on two separate tweets and claiming that representatives had contacted Carroll to apologize. Apology is the typically final deal response strategy suggested by SCCT.

The media as a whole did not forget the guitar incident; however, and interest in the saga flared again in October 2009 when United lost Carroll's baggage on a flight to Denver in which he was scheduled to speak about United Breaks Guitars. Months after Song 1 peaked in popularity, and even after the release of Song 2 in August 2009, United Breaks Guitars got more publicity as the media drummed the airline on losing the luggage of its most-outspoken passenger. Articles framed United as a company that still had not learned its lesson and

ridiculed the airline for its inattention to Carroll's luggage, of all possible passengers. The story manifested in playful headlines such as *The LA Times*' "United breaks guitars...and loses luggage too: The saga continues" (Reynolds, 2009), *The Globe and Mail*'s "YouTube star goes from broken strings to missing bag" (Wheeler, 2009), *The Philadelphia Inquirer*'s "United hits 'Breaks Guitars' musician again" (Belden, 2009), and *Flight Wisdom blog*'s "United breaks guitars? United loses luggage?" (Flight Wisdom, 2009b). Even after the publicity Carroll garnered with United Breaks Guitars, the media reported that the airline still appeared to not be careful with Carroll's luggage. While the organization was outspoken in responding that lost luggage was an anomaly, the negative publicity did not reinforce United's promise that it was using United Breaks Guitars to change its culture.

Implications for Public Relations Managers

While United Breaks Guitars was clearly a lesson in why public relations practitioners must rethink crisis communication plans, it is not the only example of a potentially destructive social media wildfire. The storyline of Carroll's video and song is a prime example of what *not* to do from an organizational perspective and how communications trends online may affect crisis communication plans. It is important to note, however, that there are many examples of organizations that were successful in "fighting the fire." As such, the actions, tools, and messages communicated in the success stories are worth noting and provide a striking comparison to the United Breaks Guitars incident.

A prime example of a crisis averted was found with Ford and the timely tweets of its head of social media, Scott Monty. In December 2008, Monty woke up to a number of Twitter alerts criticizing Ford for attempting to shut down a 10-year-old fan site, TheRangerStation.com (Needleman, 2009). Overnight, the company received roughly 1,000

complaints through e-mail, and by morning the news was already circulating among other Ford fan sites, blogs and Twitter. At precisely 7:29 a.m., Monty tweeted that he was checking into the matter and continued to update his account throughout the day regarding the progress of his inquiry (Ploof, 2008). Knowing that he could not spread his messages alone, he asked his followers to retweet specific messages and also used a hashtag to help aggregate and track conversations about the Ranger Station. One tweet retweeted by 19 followers reached 13,400 additional users, and another message that 25 followers retweeted reached 21,000 additional people on Twitter. As it turned out, a request for \$5,000 and cease-and-desist letter from Ford's legal team to Jim Oakes, the owner of The Ranger Station, sparked the debate. However, Monty was able to renegotiate the terms of the letter, communicate the new options to Oakes, and arrange for the fan site to remain live. Twenty-two hours, 26 minutes, and 138 tweets later, the problem was defused and outlined in real time on Twitter for the online audience to follow.

A similar story of extinguishing the fire occurred with United's competitor American Airlines and an erroneous post on Twitter regarding free flights for doctors and nurses following the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti (Kim, 2010). The message, which originated from a person on the ground in Haiti who misconstrued information, went viral January 13, 2010, after being re-tweeted by famous movie critic Roger Ebert as well as actor Rainn Wilson, to a total number of followers exceeding 1.85 million users. American Airlines reacted just one hour after hearing the news, directing tweets at major news outlets alerting them to the faulty message while dispelling the rumors on its own feed. One day later, by January 14, *The New York Times* and *CNN* had aired reports cautioning the public on the misinformation.

Finally, Nikon faced a similar social media dilemma when it hosted an invitation-only cocktail event for the attendees of a blogging conference in 2009 (MWW Group, 2009). Many participants came with their families and when two such individuals requested that they bring their young children to Nikon's cocktail event, Nikon "politely informed" (para. 4) them that for safety reasons including availability of alcohol, noise level, and proximity to water, that they may not bring their children. One of these participants jokingly tweeted "#nikonhatesbabies" from her Twitter account, and both blogged about not being able to bring their children, resulting in a deluge of tweets and misinformed blog-post responses from individuals who were not attending the conference. Nikon was criticized for not understanding its audience. When the news spread, Nikon immediately contacted the two women who responded the day after the event by explaining their stories in detail and apologizing online, via Twitter. As a result, the news spread among the same social media channels in which the problem initially emerged, and Nikon was praised for its response and engagement.

In juxtaposing these success stories with the timeline of United Breaks Guitars, it is evident that United did not follow the same philosophy as Ford, American Airlines, and Nikon. Specifically, in evaluating the wildfires that were extinguished, the elements of timing and mode of communication were the most strikingly different from United Breaks Guitars. Once Carroll posted Song 1, United did not react to the video until roughly 13 hours later. Although it is not known the exact hour in which United learned of the launch of Song 1, the airline was told that there would be a video by Carroll well in advance in November 2008, nearly nine months prior to the video's posting. In that time, United could have planned or anticipated how to react, but did not. In contrast, the three successful

organizations responded immediately after learning of the impending crisis with times ranging anywhere from one to six hours. What is important to note is that if an organization cannot resolve a dilemma immediately, acknowledgement of the effort is just as important, as seen with Ford and the Ranger Station. Rather than keeping audiences waiting, wondering, and speculating if the organization is even doing something, successful practitioners will keep publics apprised throughout the process. To an audience member, constant updates show that although an organization may not have an immediate solution, it is still working to find one.

The second imperative element to extinguishing a social media wildfire is the mode of communication. In order to mitigate damage without alerting more people to the presence of a crisis, an organization must strategically assess what medium or media are best-suited to deliver the response. Oftentimes the answer is the medium in which the message or content is being circulated. For example when the erroneous tweet emerged about American Airlines, the organization immediately utilized its own Twitter feed to dispel the rumors. The audience that initially learned of the false airline promotion was on Twitter; therefore, in an attempt to target those same individuals for clarification, AA chose to tweet. Furthermore, it utilized Twitter in order to alert major news outlets to aid in dispelling the rumor. Thus, American's use of Twitter was two-fold; not only were the same Twitter users alerted to the myth, but the Twitter universe as a whole could witness American's attempts to contact news outlets to help put out the fire. In comparison, United Airlines chose to use Twitter to communicate, despite the fact that an audience residing largely on YouTube was viewing United Breaks Guitars. While Song 1 was a hotly discussed topic on Twitter (Greenfield, 2009), partly validating United's use of the medium to communicate, it was not the primary medium in

which the message should have been disseminated. Additionally, if the audience attempted to seek out United's response, it would have likely visited the airline's Web site that also did not feature a response, nor did it clearly redirect audiences to its Twitter feed where its responses were located. The faulty American Airlines promotion began on Twitter, but the airline did not issue a YouTube video as an initial response. The same individuals looking for information on Twitter are equivalent to those on YouTube. Not all social media are created equal in a crisis situation and targeting one does not target all. United was doubly unwise in responding primarily on Twitter given the fact that it had its own YouTube channel to which it had loaded videos as early as July 2008 (uniteditstimetofly, 2008). What's more, unlike its counterpart American Airlines, United was not proactive in addressing the mainstream media; instead it only *re-acted* when news sources contacted it for comment. The negligence to take ownership for the crisis and the lack of transparency on the part of United only intensified the scrutiny and speculation many audience members felt as the wildfire raged.

The aforementioned success stories and the timeline of United Breaks Guitars are not exactly the same; however, amidst these stories are best practices that may have aided United in extinguishing the social media wildfire it faced with United Breaks Guitars. Although Nikon and Ford may have been more eager to put out the fire because the sources of the content were influential opinion leaders, both organizations were still quick to acknowledge a problem. American Airlines, however, dealt with a single individual – an everyman, or woman – much like Carroll who lit the tinder in the United crisis.

In today's online society, it is imperative that an organization understands that the old idiom of "everyone has a voice" is truthful now, more than ever. It was precisely this idea that added to the conviction of Carroll's story. In creating United Breaks Guitars, Carroll

spoke for every individual who had ever been frustrated or felt underappreciated by an organization's seemingly callous treatment of a personal situation. His unmended, broken guitar became a symbol for the fractured relationship between large companies and their patrons. His story became everyone's story. While the damage to his guitar was considered minor property damage, the community that embraced his story added its own tales of abused property, and eventually, the amount of "destruction" compounded, further complicating United's attempt to atone for its mistakes. The effect of, and protocol for, minor property damage changed, and what was believed to be a small, isolated incident became a large-scale, class-action disaster: a wildfire burning out of control. Nevertheless, in stepping back, appraising the damage, and looking to other examples, United and other similar organizations may now be more equipped to handle future crises much like United Breaks Guitars.

Solution: Fight viral with viral

Based on the lessons learned from United Breaks Guitars as well as the successfully extinguished social media wildfires exemplified by the Ford, American Airlines and Nikon cases, practitioners may take away a number of helpful tactics to help prevent similar crises. Although there are many factors to keep in mind when dealing with a social media wildfire, the following recommendations are imperative to successfully preventing the fire from spreading:

1. Speed of Response. As any public relations practitioner knows, the contents of a well-crafted message are important; however, in social media, timing is critical. Social media is a two-way conversation, and if an organization does not immediately tweet, post or blog back, speculation and rumors will spread exponentially. Practitioners must respond immediately to let their publics know that they are listening and are preparing to reply,

even if the answer has not yet been determined. It is not so much what you say but how quickly you say it.

2. Channels. Much like traditional crisis situations, the utilization of appropriate channels to reach an audience is vital. The difference with social media is that there is a plethora of new channels constantly emerging that practitioners must familiarize themselves with in order to respond tactfully if and when a crisis presents itself. What's more, communications on each channel must be responded to with the same amount of gravity. A 140-character tweet may seem diminutive; however, if the person tweeting has hundreds of followers, prepare to multiply the number of impressions based on the influence of the tweeter and the influence of his or her followers. Remember that Internet celebrities abound, and often it only takes one "Roger Ebert" for a message to catch fire. Above all else, practitioners must always use the same channel to respond that the complainant initially uses so as to reach the same audiences. If not, the intended audience may not be reached, and practitioners run the risk of a response going unheard and even worse, interpreted as "going silent," much like when United Airlines used a microblog to respond to Carroll's video.

3. Types. Within each channel lay multitudes of different types of social media. Practitioners must be prepared to use the appropriate media type or combination of types in order to provide a speedy, time-sensitive response. To do this, practitioners must take their knowledge of the various types of social media and step back from the situation, asking themselves questions like: What action is taking place? What is the public's context of this crisis? What is the nature of the social media environment where the conversation is happening? Deciphering answers to these questions will give managers a

better idea of what type of social media to use and how best to utilize them to their greatest communicative potential.

Although numerous best practices may be ascertained from the social media wildfires explored in this case analysis, the three factors of speed of response, channels and types are baseline components to keep in mind when addressing a social media wildfire. A wildfire is characterized by the presence of viral content, and a practitioner must employ similar tactics for the organization's response to go viral as well if he or she wants the message to resonate and be heard. Yet just as social media can be damaging to a brand, it can also be complimentary if used the right way. Case in point, during its blogging incident, Nikon was at one minute lambasted for being out of touch with customers, then applauded in the next for its sensitivity and responsiveness. Now more than ever, practitioners must try to understand the context of a crisis, particularly from the audience's point of view. Part of the pervasiveness of a social media wildfire is its ability to reconstruct an individual's past experience with a given crisis. United Breaks Guitars became an online space for people who had dealt with damaged luggage or any customer service aggravations to console one another. If an organization understands a situation like this, it may be able to send the right messages to help alleviate painful memories and avoid similar issues in the future.

Conclusion

This study explores crisis communication in a social media context and posits the existence of an entirely new phenomenon. There are other details that could also be explored to research the impact of social media as it continues to emerge. Further research that would enhance findings in this study might involve conducting in-depth interviews with the public relations team at United to garner a firmer understanding of its crisis communication plan

regarding situations arising online. United would not respond to my inquiries to participate in the study; however, representatives of the airline may be more receptive to participation once more time has passed after the guitar incident. With regard to method, it might also be advantageous to code multiple samples of comments from different time periods following the launch of the song to gauge the audiences' formulation of meaning over time. Trends displayed over a substantial length of time may yield more findings about the nature or cycle of a "wildfire." Nevertheless, given the need for public relations research, particularly in the rapidly emerging area of new media and crisis communication, this study succeeds in making both analytical and practical contributions.

The exchanges and interactions of various publics during the events surrounding the United Breaks Guitars video provided a current-day example of how crisis communication must evolve to avoid a social media wildfire. In analyzing the texts by the general public, the responses to United Airline's actions, and Carroll's own perceptions of the incident, certain themes and significant details emerged, revealing the changing meanings among all parties involved. In studying the ways these perceptions and meanings shifted, practitioners will be better prepared to anticipate what actions they should execute in order to keep a social media wildfire from spreading.

True to the definition of a "wildfire," United Breaks Guitars was initiated online on YouTube, and conversation about it was perpetuated through thousands of comments. The video also qualified as viral, meeting Golan and Zaidner's (2008) standards by possessing humor and functions like providing information and branding. Subjects of the comments found during the coding ranged from seemingly obscure religious statements to politics to advice on how to stow a guitar to a demand for Carroll to host *Saturday Night Live*. The tone

of comments varied extensively from anger and use of expletives to use of humor. The extreme variation of tones and subjects indicated that commentary on this video spun wildly out of control – perpetuating *a* conversation, not always one surrounding United Breaks Guitars. Nevertheless, the growing tally of comments and views of the video only added to its popularity and viral appeal.

The phenomenon of a social media wildfire will continue to present itself as long as individuals look to the Internet and social media as frequently as they do now. The results of this research provide significant details about the ways in which meanings change and shift once user-generated content goes viral. Communal online spaces like the comment area on YouTube allow negative perceptions to flourish and spread, and speculations to spin out of control. If an organization does not catch potentially damaging content before it goes viral or respond to it appropriately, it may be left scrambling to change attitudes in the wake of a disaster that could have been prevented. This was the case with United Airlines: it had the tools but simply lacked the know-how and in the end, it was burned badly in a social media wildfire.

Appendix I: United Breaks Guitars One-Week Timeline

Monday, July 6, 2009 11:30 p.m. (AST)

- Dave Carroll posts United Breaks Guitars Song 1 on YouTube

Tuesday, July 7, 2009

- UA attempts to contact Carroll to apologize and offer compensation (UnitedAirlines, 2009a). They do not speak.
- At 2:21 p.m. CST United Airlines responds publically - for the first time - to Song 1 on Twitter: "This has struck a chord with us and we've contacted him to make it right." (UnitedAirlines, 2009a)
- In the first 23 hours, Song 1 tallies 461 comments (Reynolds, 2009)
- Video reaches 24,000 views by the evening (Reynolds, 2009)

Wednesday, July 8, 2009

- UA tweets about using video for training employees, calls it "excellent" (UnitedAirlines, 2009e)
- Song 1 is embedded on www.nbcchicago.com (sonsofmaxwell, 2009)
- Video reaches 135,000 by midday (Serjeantson, 2010)

Thursday, July 9, 2009

- Video collects about 150,000 views (gerrior99, 2009)
- Featured on CNN's "The Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer" 5-8 p.m. ET
- Carroll is interviewed by ABC News via Skype (Fisher, 2009)
- Video reaches 640,000 views as of 6:43 p.m. (Fisher, 2009)

Friday, July 10, 2009

- At 10:35 a.m., Carroll appears on CBS' "The Early Show" - states that he has not spoken with UA yet (CBSNewsOnline, 2009)
- Song 1 is embedded on www.msnbc.msn.com (sonsofmaxwell, 2009)
- UA representative Rob Bradford calls to offer Carroll \$1,200 in flight vouchers and money in repairs, which he declines (Bliss, 2009)
- Carroll issues "STATEMENT" video on YouTube updating fans on the status of the situation, asking United to donate the money it offered him to charity
- Taylor Guitars posts a response video to Song 1 on YouTube in support of Carroll
- 5:44 p.m. United reports a \$3,000 donation to music charity of Carroll 's choice. Tweets, "Wud like Dave to sing a happy tune--as asked we gave 3K to Theloneous Monk Instittue of Jazz Music Education for Kids." (UnitedAirlines, 2009g)
- Video reaches 1.5 million views (Simons, 2009)

Saturday, July 11, 2009

- Song 1 featured on the New York Times blog, Laugh Lines (NY Times)

Monday, July 13, 2009

- Video reaches nearly 2.5 million views (Bliss)
- By Tuesday, July 14, 2009 Son 1 becomes available for purchase on iTunes

The time zone of a Twitter feed is selected and determined by the user when the account is established. United's Twitter location is Chicago, Illinois; therefore, it is believed that the time zone of the Twitter feed is CST or Central Standard Time. There is a two-hour time difference between CST and AST, the time zone in Nova Scotia, Canada.

Appendix II: Lyrics

Lyrics to "United Breaks Guitars"

I flew United Airlines on my way to Nebraska
The plane departed, Halifax, connecting in Chicago's O'Hare.
While on the ground, a passenger said from the seat behind me,
'My God, they're throwing guitars out there!'

The band and I exchanged a look, best described as terror
At the action on the tarmac, and knowing whose projectiles these would be.
So before I left Chicago, I alerted three employees
Who showed complete indifference towards me.

Chorus:

United... (United...)
You broke my Taylor Guitar
United... (United...)
Some big help you are

You broke it, you should fix it
You're liable, just admit it
I should've flown with someone else
Or gone by car
'Cause United breaks guitars.

When we landed in Nebraska, I confirmed what I'd suspected
My Taylor'd been the victim of a vicious act of malice at O'Hare.
So began a year-long saga, of 'pass the buck,' 'don't ask me,'
and 'I'm sorry, sir, your claim can go no where.'
So to all the airlines people, from New York to New Delhi
Including kind Ms. Irlweg, who says the final word from them is 'No.'

I heard all your excuses,
And I've chased your wild geoses
And this attitude of yours, I say, must go.

[Chorus]

Well, I won't say that I'll never fly with you again,
'Cause, maybe, to save the world, I probably would,
But that won't likely happen,
And if it did, I wouldn't bring my luggage
'Cause you'd just go and break it,
Into a thousand pieces,
Just like you broke my heart.

When United breaks guitars.

[Chorus]

Yeah, United breaks guitars.

Yeah, United breaks guitars.

Appendix III: IRB Exemption

IRB Notice

IRB <irb_no_reply@mailserv.grad.unc.edu>
To: asoule@email.unc.edu
Cc: lboynton@email.unc.edu, francesca@unc.edu

Mon, Feb 1, 2010 at 11:32 AM

To: Alli Soule
Journalism and Mass Communication
CB: 3365

From: Behavioral IRB

Date: 2/01/2010

RE: Notice of IRB Exemption
Exemption Category: 2.Survey, interview, public observation
Study #: 10-0137

Study Title: Fighting the Social Media Wildfire: How Crisis Communication Must Adapt to Prevent from Fanning the Flames

This submission has been reviewed by the above IRB and was determined to be exempt from further review according to the regulatory category cited above under 45 CFR 46.101(b).

Study Description:

Purpose: To learn about how the utilization of social media is forcing public relations practitioners to re-evaluate crisis communication plans.

Participants: Dave Carroll

Procedures: Conduct case study

Investigator's Responsibilities:

If your study protocol changes in such a way that exempt status would no longer apply, you should contact the above IRB before making the changes. The IRB will maintain records for this study for 3 years, at which time you will be contacted about the status of the study.

Researchers are reminded that additional approvals may be needed from relevant "gatekeepers" to access subjects (e.g., principals, facility directors, healthcare system).

Lawrence B. Rosenfeld, Ph.D.
Office of Human Research Ethics
Co-Chair, Behavioral Institutional Review Board
aa-irb-chair@unc.edu

CC: Lois Boynton, Journalism and Mass Communication
Francesca Carpentier (School of Journalism and Mass Communication), Non-IRB Review Contact

IRB Informational Message—please do not use email REPLY to this address

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