

ONLINE-IGNITED CRISES AND POST-CRISIS IMAGE RESTORATION: EXAMPLE OF FLIGHT 3411 INCIDENT

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to examine the flow and evolution of the communication crises in a digital space, how different crisis response approaches contributed to the escalation and suppression of the crisis, and how communicating of post-crisis organizational and policy changes contributed to the image restoration. The crisis evolution and flow have been investigated through the document analysis, based on the publicly available sources related to the exemplary critical situation – Flight 3411 incident. The textual analysis, which is the prevalent and primary method of analysis in image repair and image restoration studies, has been used to analyze both crisis and post-crisis situation. Reactive approach to communication contribute to the quick evolution of the crisis. Denial responses in the early crisis stage contribute to spreading out the crisis. Changing communication approach from reactive to proactive and from denial to rebuilding (Coombs, 2007) may contribute to the crisis suppression and risk mitigation. Consistent communicating of the policy changes in the aftermath of the crisis may contribute to rebuilding the organizational image. This paper is among the rare contributions analyzing mechanisms of the crisis evolution, including transformation of a paracrisis into crisis. Moreover, it depicts the role of post-crisis communications in the organizational image restoration in the digital era. The paper provides an overview how changes of the communications approach affect the flow of the crisis and offers conclusions useful both for theoretical and practical considerations of the paracrises, crisis communications and post-crisis communications.

Keywords - Crisis management, Communication management, Crisis Communication, Corporate communications, Paracrisis

Introduction

Crisis is the situation which may have deep and structural impact on any organization, institution, or brand. There are no organizations, irrespective of their scale, capabilities, level of development, or scope of activities and operations, that is completely protected from the crisis. Coombs (2010) pointed out that crisis management appeared from the reality of crises, which led the organizations to the need for preparation and readiness to respond. Historical findings of the numerous researches indicate that communication is critically important and relevant component in crisis and risk management (Reynolds & Quinn, 2008; Coombs, 2010; Reilly, 1993; Luo & Zhai, 2017; Roh, 2017; Seeger et al., 2020). Keeping in mind that crisis is an interactive process (Tomić et al, 2015), organizations are required to take proactive stance to any situation which might potentially endanger the reputation, allowing maximization of the opportunities and minimization of the dangers it confronts (Stacks, 2003; Selakovic, 2021). Proper planning and pre-identification of the zones of possible crisis occurrence is vital for timely and effective communication during the crisis (Penrose, 2000; Selakovic, 2021). Thus, it is important to understand the pattern of crisis risk mitigation.

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Situational Crisis Communication Theory – SCCT (Coombs, 2007) enables identification and choice of the strategic communication response that protects reputation of an organization in the best possible manner (Mattila, 2009). The algorithmic approach to the identification of the appropriate response, as suggested by Selakovic (2021), enables choice of various crisis response approaches in different stages of the crisis. This paper offers detailed and in-depth document analysis of the United Express Flight 3411 overbooking incident. Within the paper, it is demonstrated how an online-ignited crisis was triggered and how different communication approaches in different stages of a crisis impacted its flow. Furthermore, an overview of the organizational post-crisis communications related to the image restoration has been provided. Based on the analysis of publicly available sources, the paper seeks to identify all elements of the crisis communication in this case and to help practitioners to handle paracrisis, crisis and post-crisis communication. The significance of this paper is multiple. It is among the rare studies analyzing mechanisms of evolution of the paracrisis into the crisis. Additionally, the paper identifies the role of post-crisis communications in the organizational image restoration in the digital era. It also provides an overview how changes of the communications approach affect the flow of the crisis and offers conclusions useful both for theoretical and practical considerations of the paracrises, crisis communications and post-crisis communications.

Literature Review

The development of social and digital communication channels and shifting communication in real-time, with the need for immediacy (Bodker & Anderson, 2019) set new challenges related to handling the crisis situations. Social media and propulsive expansion of user-generated content opened new possibilities for expressing negative perceptions and therefore increased crises susceptibility of the organizations (Kohler, 2008; Dai et al., 2022). Such content can create strong moral outrage (Coombs & Tachkova, 2022). Social media are not only a channel for spreading out the crisis in the digital space; at the same time, they are having the potential to be useful tool for real time two-way communication and enabler of quick and effective organizational response. According to Wukich (2016) and Selakovic et al. (2020), social media responses can be used as a crisis communication tool in the wide spectrum of crisis and emergency situations.

As any other crisis situations, online-ignited crises may vary by their intensity, duration and impact. Although there are numerous online challenges, only some of them become real crisis situations. The early public challenge, similar to crisis, but without direct impact towards the stakeholders, is defined as paracrisis - „publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior“ (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 409). The paracrisis becomes a crisis in the moment when threat transforms into visible manifest and stakeholders start paying attention to the concern (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). To respond effectively with the appropriate strategies, the practitioners need to understand how crises are triggered online, how the crises evolve and escalate within the social media, and how they gain credibility when reported in the mainstream media (Pang et al, 2014; Selakovic, 2021). In the past years, dozens of notable examples of the paracrises have been identified (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Pang, 2013; Pang et al, 2014; Damayanti, 2020; Selakovic et al., 2020; Kice & Klyueva, 2022). Delayed or inappropriate responses to the paracrises are considered as one of the key factors for their evolving into the crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Thus, this research seeks to examine, using available literature and United Express Flight 3411 incident document analysis:

RQ1. What approaches and attitudes foster evolution of a paracrisis into the crisis?

An organization can hold no, minimal or strong responsibility for the crisis (Coombs, 2015). The organizational response, in most cases spanning in a spectrum from the apology to denial, substantially influences duration and the consequences of a crisis (Mattila, 2009). Coombs (2007) suggested ten

different crisis response strategies, spreading between denial, diminishment, rebuilding and bolstering postures, as shown in Table 1.

Denial Posture	
Attacking the Accuser	The crisis manager confronts the person or group that claims that a crisis exists. The response may include a threat to use force (e.g. lawsuit) against the accuser.
Denial	The crisis manager states that no crisis exists. The response may include explaining why there is no crisis.
Scapegoating	Some other person or group outside of the organization is blamed for the crisis.
Diminishment Posture	
Excusing	The crisis manager tries to minimize the organization's responsibility for the crisis. The response can include denying any intention to do harm or claiming that the organization had no control of the events which led to the crisis.
Justification	The crisis manager tries to minimize the perceived damage associated with the crisis. The response can include stating that there were no serious damages or injuries or claiming that the victims deserved what they received.
Rebuilding Posture	
Compensation	The organization provides money or other gifts to the victims.
Apology	The crisis manager publicly states that the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks forgiveness.
Bolstering Posture	
Reminding	The organization tells stakeholders about its past good works.
Ingratiation	The organization praises stakeholders.
Victimage	The organization explains how it too is a victim of the crisis.

Table 1: Crisis response strategies (based on Coombs, 2007)

Competence and integrity are two key elements for reputation of an organization (Brown & Dacin, 1997). Accordingly, Coombs (2015, p. 146) defines competence-based crisis as a crisis which „reveal a problem arising from an error that stems from the organization's lack of skill“. In case of the integrity-based crisis, the organization is held to have strong responsibility for the crisis, while „managers demonstrate little regard for the morality“ (ibidem, p. 146). Kim et al. (2004) concluded that an apology might be more effective in case of competence-based crises, while denial seems more efficient for integrity-based crises. Trust and credibility are essential elements of any crisis communication responses, and they are demonstrated through empathy, caring, competence, expertise, honesty, openness, commitment and dedication (Reynolds & Quinn, 2008). According to Veil et al. (2011), work of numerous scholars led to the identification of the best practices and creating guidelines for risk and crisis communication by the National Center for Food Protection and Defense (NCFPD). The NCFPD guidelines (Table 2) include the following points:

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

Table 2: NCFPD guidelines (based on Veil et al, 2011)

In most cases responsive and proactive approach is essential for successful crisis communication (Stacks, 2003). Although non-responsive strategy might work in some cultures (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010), no-response approach in the era of social media seems unlikely to make positive impact on resolving crisis situation and organizational image restoration after the crisis (Ye & Ki, 2017). Therefore, this paper, based on the available literature and United Express Flight 3411 incident documentary analysis, seeks to examine:

RQ2. What crisis response approaches are effective in case of the online-ignited crises?

Despite that positive public image of the organization affected by crisis could be ruined when a crisis occurs (Mitroff, 2004), the crisis situation does not necessarily lead to a negative outcome for the organization (Skoko, 2006). Even though the crises are considered as dangerous or turning points in the life cycle of an organization, the organizations may get out from the crisis even stronger than they were prior to it (Skoko, 2006; Ulmer et al, 2013). The crisis may contribute to the organizational learning and improvement (Nava, 2022). Although post-crisis communication is usually oriented towards repairing reputation and preventing further reputational damage for an organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2009), Ulmer et al. (2007) are pointing out that, depending upon the crisis, issues of image restoration may emerge as central topics of an organization in the post-crisis discourse. Benoit (1995) divided image restoration strategies into five broad categories: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification, while Coombs and Tachkova (2023) offered different approach to the image restoration, grounded in the Situational Crisis Communication Theory. Pang (2012) argued that image restoration approaches include image repair, image renewal and image re-invention.

Moreover, image restoration sometimes requires deeper organizational action; changes in communication are insufficient to bring an organization to the desired perception. The process of the post-crisis reintegration includes stakeholder, image, organizational and crisis management elements. All these elements are necessary to implement number of complex and sequential actions designed to address questions and concerns of the stakeholders (Pfarrer et al, 2008). Coombs (2010) claims it is vital to communicate necessary changes both internally and externally in the post-crisis phase. According to Pfarrer et al. (2008), the process of the organizational reintegration includes four key stages: discovery, explanation, penance and rehabilitation, as shown on Table 3:

Stage	Relevant Literature	Salient Stakeholders	Key Stakeholder Question	Additional Stakeholder Discourse	Possible Organization Actions	Concurrence on . . . (outcome)
Discovery	Image management Voluntary disclosure	Media Regulators Consumers	What happened?	How egregious? Was the company forthcoming and cooperative? Do we have all the facts? Who is to blame?	Voluntary disclosure Internal investigation Public cooperation	Facts of the transgression
Explanation	Organizational justice	Investors Employees Consumers Media	Why did it happen?	Does the explanation fit the transgression? Has leadership accepted responsibility? Was the explanation adequate and sincere?	Acknowledge wrongdoing Express regret Accept responsibility Offer amends Apologize	Appropriateness (i.e., adequacy and sincerity) of explanation
Penance	Organizational justice Equity theory Research on forgiveness Shaming theory	Media Consumers Investors Activists	How should the organization be punished?	Does the punishment equal the crime? Was the official punishment adequate? What should the unofficial punishment be?	Accept verdict Acknowledge that verdict is equitable Serve time without resistance	Equity of punishment
Rehabilitation	Organization renewal Crisis management Public relations	Employees Investors Consumers Activists Local community	What organizational changes have been made?	Are internal and external changes consistent? Do symbolic changes reflect real behavior? Are changes real or simply window dressing?	Changes in line with transgression Internal changes in management, reward structures, and personnel External portrayal of new ethical image Corporate responsibility New mission statement Code of conduct	Reintegration into group of legitimate organizations

Table 3: Model of Reintegration (Pfarrer et al, 2008)

Organizational post-crisis communications may increase or decrease uncertainties among the stakeholders in the image renewal process (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002). Post-crisis communications might tend to bring up an organizational image renewal by putting the organizational changes in the centre of the organizational rhetoric and external communications (Anderson, 2013). Crisis communication efforts, if performed adequately, can bring short-term or long-term gain to the organizational reputation (Coombs, 2015). Hence, the renewal discourse in the post-crisis period may help the organization to overcome the issues with the stakeholders (Seeger et al, 2005). Nevertheless, communication without the action is not sufficient in certain cases: corrective action is required to be performed and communicated in order to restore or renew the reputation of the organization (Sellnow et al, 1998). Thus, based on the available literature and United Express Flight 3411 incident documentary analysis, this paper intends to examine:

RQ3. Can post-crisis communication in case of the online-ignited crises be effective without communicating organizational and policy changes?

Methodology

In general, multiple methods, such as observation, interviews or documentary analysis, can be used to analyze a particular situation (Gilgun, 1994). The crisis has been analyzed in detail using the document analysis, which is considered as particularly applicable to qualitative research (Bowen, 2009).

The online-ignited crisis of United Airlines following United Express Flight 3411 overbooking incident, occurred on April 9th, 2017, has been the central subject of the document analysis.

Four sets of data have been analyzed. The first three sets of data were used to track the life cycle of the crisis and identify organizational responses to the crisis risk and crisis itself. The fourth set of data was used to examine the financial impact of the crisis on the organization.

Dataset 1: Internet documents such as Twitter updates, Facebook posts and comments and web log posts were searched online. Documentation by journalists, commentators, social media professionals and bloggers, accompanied with the original Twitter and Facebook posts, was available for analysis. The dataset is used to track the generation of the critical event, evolution of paracrisis into the crisis, life of the crisis, engagement and sentiment during the crisis and post-crisis roll back.

Dataset 2: News reports from the conventional media and news agencies related to the crisis were sourced from the publicly available Internet portals of the news publications and news agencies. The data collected were used to reconstruct the flow of the crisis events and to analyze mainstream media coverage of the crises.

Dataset 3: Publicly available online posts, news releases and documents that originated from the organization involved into the crisis. Organizational responses have been used to analyze the approaches, actions and stances taken by the organization involved into the crisis.

Dataset 4: Publicly available stock price reports and financial analyses have been used to examine how the crisis had impacted the organization.

The constant comparative method, described by Glaser and Strauss (2009), has been used to analyze datasets 1-3. The method consists of four distinct stages:

- (1) comparing the categories;
- (2) integrating the categories;
- (3) delimiting the theory;
- (4) writing the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2009).

The findings were presented according to the observations outcoming from the performed analysis. Analysis of the organizational responses was made through the textual analysis, which is the prevalent and primary method of analysis in image repair and image restoration studies, has been used (Benoit, 2000; Pang et al, 2014). Dataset 4 was accessed to understand the impact of the crisis on the organization.

Findings of the Document Analysis: United Express Flight 3411 Incident

Day 0 (April 9th, 2017): The Outbreak

On Sunday, April 9th, 2017, the security officials took out forcibly the paying passenger Dr David Dao off from the United Express Flight 3411 from Chicago to Louisville. The United Express Flight 3411 was fully booked. However, four seats were needed to fly pilots and a crew of the Republic Airlines to Louisville for another flight (Thomaselli, 2017). United offered incentives to get four passengers to voluntarily give up their seats. When the incentives did not resolve the issue, four passengers who were told to get off the plane were chosen. Three of the selected passengers complied. Law enforcement officials had to forcibly remove the fourth selected passenger, Dr. David Dao, an Asian-American, who refused to leave the aircraft (Lint, 2017).

Dr. Dao was injured as he was carried off the plane (Lint, 2017). As a result of this action, Dr Dao was hospitalised due to broken nose, two broken teeth and a concussion (Smith, 2017; Thomaselli, 2017). Multiple passengers captured the confrontation between Dr Dao and the security officials and posted it

using social media (Lint, 2017). The video footage of the incident, posted by Twitter user Jayse D. Anspach (Twitter: @jaysedavid) at 7.30PM, had more than 168.000 retweets (Anspach, 2017). Within 24 hours after an incident, the video posted by Anspach has been viewed more than 6.000.000 times (Marotti & Zumbach, 2017). United was mentioned in his post and it initially replied, asking for more details (Ohlheiser, 2017). Video of another Twitter user, Tyler Bridges (Twitter: Tyler_Bridges), mentioning United Airlines, Fox News and CNN official accounts in his post, had more than 22.000 retweets (Bridges, 2017). United's Twitter account also replied promptly to the video, asking about what's happening on board the plane (Ohlheiser, 2017). The wife of Tyler Bridges, Audra, posted a video of the incident on Facebook, which was shared more than 87,000 times and viewed 6.8 million times within first 22 hours after the incident (Marotti & Zumbach, 2017).

Within two hours, an incident began to evolve into the crisis, capturing attention of the local news station WHAS11, which first contacted the passengers who posted the video footage of an incident (Ohlheiser, 2017). Louisville local portal Courier Journal reported about the incident immediately after midnight, less than 5 hours after posting first video (Ohlheiser, 2017; Courier-Journal, 2017), posting video footage and response from the United. However, the United spokesperson responded via e-mail directly and only to Courier Journal (Courier-Journal, 2017). According to Courier-Journal (2017), the United spokesperson response to the query was:

"Flight 3411 from Chicago to Louisville was overbooked. After our team looked for volunteers, one customer refused to leave the aircraft voluntarily and law enforcement was asked to come to the gate. We apologize for the overbook situation. Further details on the removed customer should be directed to authorities."

Although an incident initiated certain social media attention, during the night there were fewer than a dozen news articles about United. However, search interest started to creep upward. By the morning, the video leaked to the conventional media and United social media accounts were widely trolled by angry social media users (Ohlheiser, 2017).

Day 1 (April 10th, 2017): The Escalation

The first wider response from the United came early April 10th, when the crisis evolved and attracted high media attention, spilling from social media and local portals to the top national news (Ohlheiser, 2017). In a brief Twitter response on Monday morning, United said, "We apologize for the overbook situation," but made no reference to Dr. Dao or the recorded incident (Anspach, 2017; McCann, 2017). As the crisis continued to evolve, in the next response, later April 10th, the United Airlines Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Oscar Munoz expressed the upset, but failed to promptly acknowledge stress and injuries Dr Dao suffered, apologizing only for having to "re-accommodate customers" (United, 2017a; McCann, 2017; CNBC, 2017). The statement has been circulated to the media (United, 2017a) and posted on the United Twitter account (United, 2017b), causing explosion of negative comments and testimonials of other unsatisfied customers. The Twitter post had more than 64.000 comments and more than 21.000 retweets (United, 2017b). The original response from the United Chief Executive Officer, as per (United (2017a) and United (2017b), was:

"This is an upsetting event to all of us here at United. I apologize for having to re-accommodate these customers. Our team is moving with a sense of urgency to work with the authorities and conduct our own detailed review of what happened. We are also reaching out to this passenger to talk directly to him and further address and resolve this situation."

Later on April 10th, in an e-mail sent to the United employees, United CEO praised and defended the crew's actions, stating this was not a mistake, but following established procedures for dealing with situations like this. This message leaked to the media, deepening the crisis (Chicago Tribune, 2017;

Ohlheiser, 2017). The original e-mail of the United CEO to the employees, according to Chicago Tribune (2017), reportedly was:

„Like you, I was upset to see and hear about what happened last night aboard United Express Flight 3411 headed from Chicago to Louisville. While the facts and circumstances are still evolving, especially with respect to why this customer defied Chicago Aviation Security Officers the way he did, to give you a clearer picture of what transpired, I've included below a recap from the preliminary reports filed by our employees.

As you will read, this situation was unfortunately compounded when one of the passengers we politely asked to deplane refused and it became necessary to contact Chicago Aviation Security Officers to help. Our employees followed established procedures for dealing with situations like this. While I deeply regret this situation arose, I also emphatically stand behind all of you, and I want to commend you for continuing to go above and beyond to ensure we fly right.

I do, however, believe there are lessons we can learn from this experience, and we are taking a close look at the circumstances surrounding this incident. Treating our customers and each other with respect and dignity is at the core of who we are, and we must always remember this no matter how challenging the situation.

Oscar

In addition to the e-mail, United CEO provided „Summary of Flight 3411“, which described the passenger as disruptive and belligerent. The „Summary of Flight 3411“, according to Chicago Tribune (2017), was:

- On Sunday, April 9, after United Express Flight 3411 was fully boarded, United's gate agents were approached by crewmembers that were told they needed to board the flight.*
- We sought volunteers and then followed our involuntary denial of boarding process (including offering up to \$1,000 in compensation) and when we approached one of these passengers to explain apologetically that he was being denied boarding, he raised his voice and refused to comply with crew member instructions.*
- He was approached a few more times after that in order to gain his compliance to come off the aircraft, and each time he refused and became more and more disruptive and belligerent.*
- Our agents were left with no choice but to call Chicago Aviation Security Officers to assist in removing the customer from the flight. He repeatedly declined to leave.*
- Chicago Aviation Security Officers were unable to gain his cooperation and physically removed him from the flight as he continued to resist — running back onto the aircraft in defiance of both our crew and security officials“*

Within an online community and conventional media, the incident provoked a strong reaction. The Facebook video posted by Audra Bridges had more than 19 million views until publicly available on the platform (Ohlheiser, 2017). The company seemed unable to handle numerous public outbursts, testimonials of the unsatisfied customers and mocks from different users and celebrities, following the incident. #Flight3411, #United, #BoycottUnited and #NewUnitedAirlinesMottos were trending topics on Twitter. Users were tweeting numerous memes and pejorative slogans (Ohlheiser, 2017; Delaney, 2017). According to Joyce (2017), mentions of the United Airlines on social networks, calculated on the

basis of Twitter, Facebook and Instagram mentions, have exceeded 1,500,000 mentions in a day - 1000% increase comparing to previous leggings crisis on March 26th (Figure 1), and exceeding 100,000 mentions per hour after escalation (Figure 2).

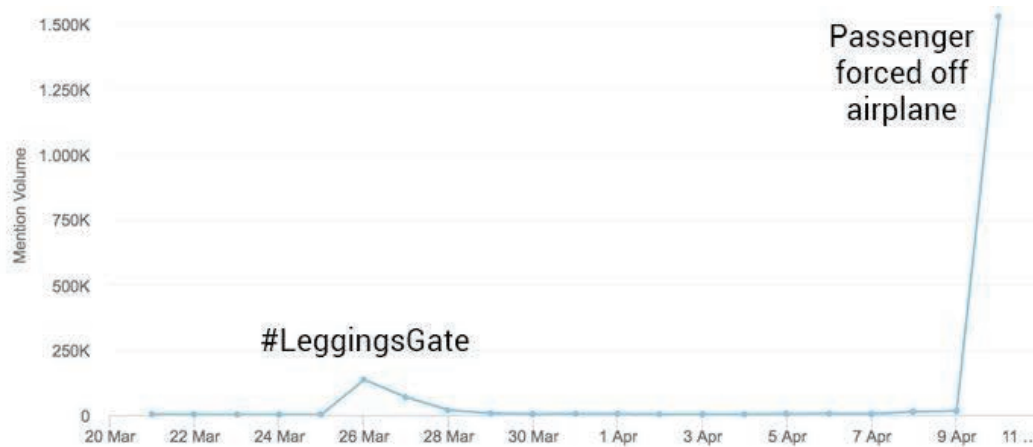


Figure 1: Twitter, Facebook and Instagram analysis of United Airlines mentions (Joyce, 2017)

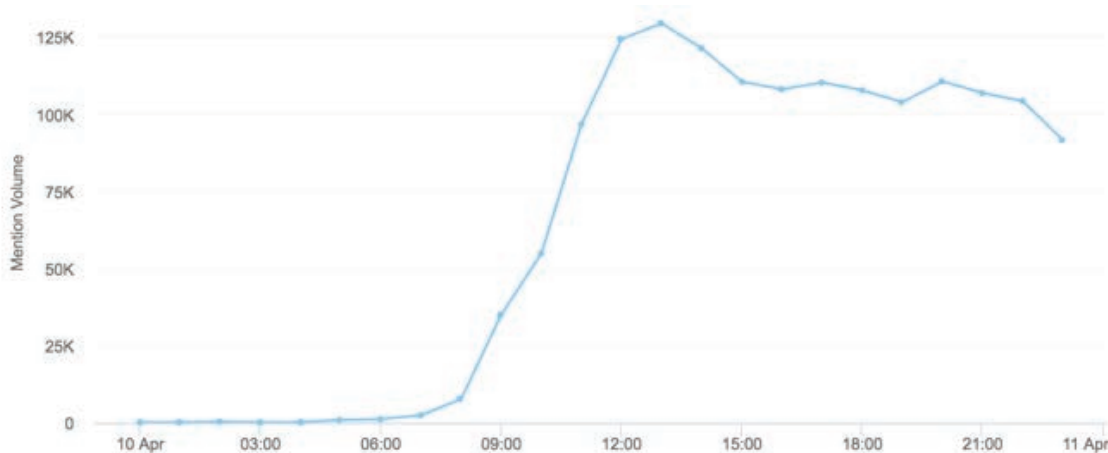


Figure 2: Hourly distribution of mentions of United Airlines on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram for April 10th, 2017 – the timings shown as EST (Joyce, 2017)

Overnight, in addition to the United States, United Express 3411 incident became trending topic in China, which is considered as one of the key growth markets for United. The main concerns spread were related to that Dao was targeted because of his Asian origin. Hashtag #UnitedAirlinesforcespassengeroffplane became the top trending topic on Weibo, a Twitter alternative popular in China (Ohlheiser, 2017).

Day 2 (April 11th, 2017): Actions, Consequences and Turning Point

Two days after the incident, the crisis was unfolding further in the leading global and national media (McCann, 2017), also occupying interest of other stakeholders. The lawmakers-senators sent a letter to the Commissioner of the Chicago Department of Aviation and United CEO, asking for the explanations of an incident (US Senate, 2017; McCann, 2017). Media widely discussed the entire situation, considering it as United’s public relations disaster (CNBC, 2017). The passenger injured in the incident, Dr. Dao, has hired lawyers to proceed with lawsuits against United (Corboy&Demetrio, 2017).

On the social media, the crisis persisted. #NewUnitedAirlinesMottos remained trending topic on Twitter in the USA, while #UnitedAirlinesforcespassengeroffplane remained trending topic on Weibo (Ohlheiser, 2017). Celebrities and companies, including the other airlines, joined campaign against United on the social networks (Beckett, 2017). Total reach of social media posts related to United Airlines decreased for most of the hashtags comparing to the day 1 of the crisis, except for the hashtag #flight3411, but sentiment remained negative (Qian, 2017; Joyce, 2017). The comparison of total number of impressions is shown at Figure 3.

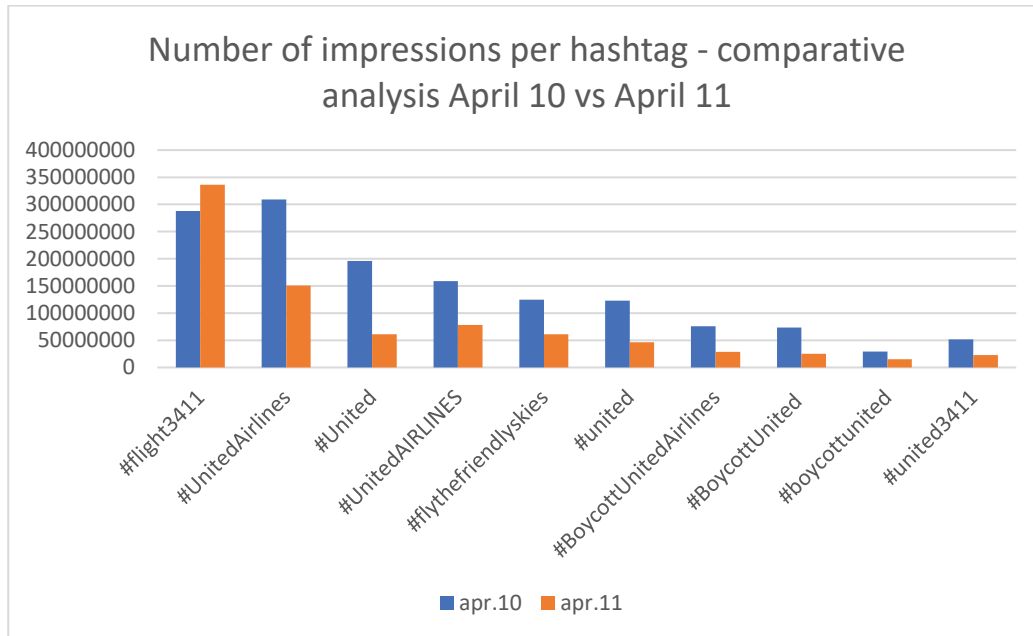


Figure 3: Comparative analysis of number of impressions for different hashtags - Day 1 and Day 2 of the United Airlines crisis (based on Joyce, 2017; Shields, 2017)

The apology statement, issued during the day, turned the discourse of the United communications (McCann, 2017). Integral text of the apology statement of the United CEO, as published on the United newsroom (United, 2017c) was:

„The truly horrific event that occurred on this flight has elicited many responses from all of us: outrage, anger, disappointment. I share all of those sentiments, and one above all: my deepest apologies for what happened. Like you, I continue to be disturbed by what happened on this flight and I deeply apologize to the customer forcibly removed and to all the customers aboard. No one should ever be mistreated this way.

I want you to know that we take full responsibility and we will work to make it right.

It's never too late to do the right thing. I have committed to our customers and our employees that we are going to fix what's broken so this never happens again. This will include a thorough review of crew movement, our policies for incentivizing volunteers in these situations, how we handle oversold situations and an examination of how we partner with airport authorities and local law enforcement. We'll communicate the results of our review by April 30th.

I promise you we will do better.“

United stock price was also affected with the crisis. During the day, the price was off for about 4%, knocking off close to \$1 billion off the company's market value (Kottasova, 2017). By late afternoon, after the apology statement from the CEO, the stock had recovered from the worst losses, but its market value was still off by \$250 million (Kottasova, 2017).

Day 3 (April 12th, 2017): Further Actions and Apologies

On April 12th, the United CEO Oscar Munoz appeared on the ABC “Good Morning, America” TV program, stating he felt “shame” when he saw the video footage of Dr. Dao being forcibly dragged from the flight. “This can never - will never - happen again on a United Airlines flight. That’s my premise and that’s my promise”, the United CEO said during the appearance (McCann, 2017). He also said he regretted his earlier public responses related to the incident (Stack, 2017).

The incident attracted attention of the United States President Donald Trump, who also commented the topic. Trump suggested that this kind of incident could be avoided. "You know, there's a point at which I'm getting off the plane ... seriously...They should have gone up higher. But to just randomly say 'You're getting off the plane,' that was terrible", said Trump (Siemaszko, 2017).

Later during the day, United announced that the company will offer full refund to every passenger on the flight and promised to stop using security forces to remove passengers from the overbooked airplanes (Stack, 2017; Smith, 2017). Stock prices of the United continued to fall slightly (NYSE, 2017), although first signs of recovery were noticeable during the trade (Huston, 2017). Social media accusations, memes, mocks and posts in highly negative context persisted, but somewhat less intensive than in the previous two days (Qian, 2017). Attorneys of Dr. Dao filed court papers necessary to preserve evidence about the incident (Siemaszko, 2017).

Day 4 (April 13th, 2017): Policy Changes

After the press conference held by one of Dr. Dao’s daughters and his attorney, United issued a prompt response. The United repeated that CEO had reached out to Dr. Dao to apologize, which the Dr. Dao’s attorney previously stated he is unaware of (Smith, 2017; McCann, 2017).

The original statement of the United (United, 2017d), was:

„We continue to express our sincerest apology to Dr. Dao. We cannot stress enough that we remain steadfast in our commitment to make this right.

This horrible situation has provided a harsh learning experience from which we will take immediate, concrete action. We have committed to our customers and our employees that we are going to fix what’s broken so this never happens again.

First, we are committing that United will not ask law enforcement officers to remove passengers from our flights unless it is a matter of safety and security. Second, we’ve started a thorough review of policies that govern crew movement, incentivizing volunteers in these situations, how we handle oversold situations and an examination of how we partner with airport authorities and local law enforcement. Third, we will fully review and improve our training programs to ensure our employees are prepared and empowered to put our customers first. Our values – not just systems – will guide everything we do. We’ll communicate the results of our review and the actions we will take by April 30.

United CEO Oscar Munoz and the company called Dr. Dao on numerous occasions to express our heartfelt and deepest apologies.“

On the same day, United internally announced a policy change "to make sure crews traveling on our aircraft are booked at least 60 minutes prior to departure“ (Gonzales, 2017). Social media attention as still present, with the peak around the press conference of Dr. Dao’s daughter and attorney, but with signs of further decline, as shown at the Figure 4 (Qian, 2017). Despite the actions taken, the stock prices continued to fall, as presented at Figure 5 (NYSE, 2017).

Day 5 (April 14th): Out from the Acute Phasis

On April 14th, not only media attention for the crisis started to diminish: negative posts at social media were still present, but their frequency was in steep decline comparing to previous days of the crisis (Qian, 2017). The frequency of negative tweets related to the United Airlines by crisis days is shown at Figure 4.

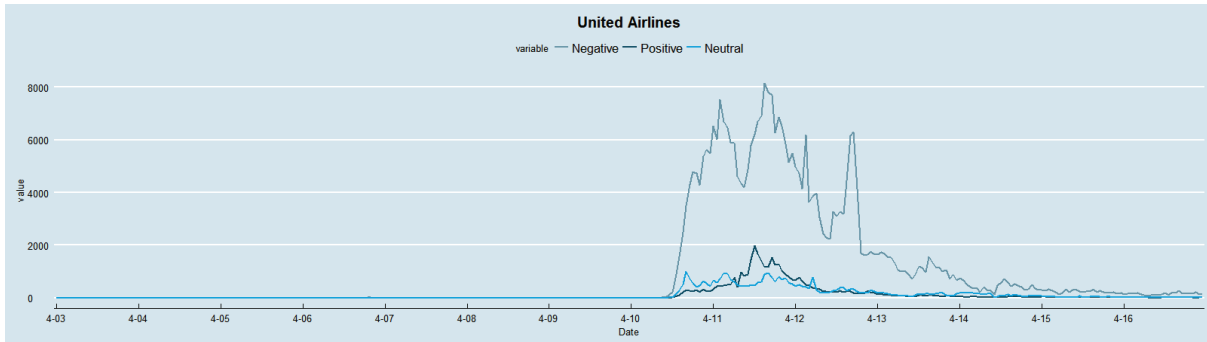


Figure 4: Frequency of positive, negative and neutral tweets about United Airlines during the crisis – the timings shown GMT+1 (Qian, 2017)

The stock price of the United stock (NYSE: UAL) began to recover after three days of slight decline (NYSE, 2017), as shown at the Figure 5:



Figure 5: United stock price (NYSE: UAL) - April 2017 (NYSE, 2017)

Although online presence of critical posts on social media was still significantly higher than before the incident, the acute phase of a crisis could be considered as finished on April 14th, 2017, 4 days after the escalation of a crisis.

The Aftermath

On April 17th, 2017, United CEO acknowledged that the viral video was "watershed moment" for the airline. He stated the crisis was a humbling experience and took full responsibility (United, 2017e). In addition, he said "It is obvious from recent experiences that we need to do a much better job serving our customers" (Dooley, 2017).

On April 21st, 2017, the media reported that CEO Oscar Munoz will not become chairman of the airline, as had been planned before the incident. Additionally, in a government filing, United stated that the airline was developing a program for 2017 so that executive compensation would be matter of revision and "directly and meaningfully tied to progress in improving the customer experience" (Wise, 2017).

On April 24, Dr. Dao's attorney announced that his client intends to file a lawsuit against United following the incident (Associated Press, 2017). Three days later, April 27th, United and Dr. Dao reached a confidential settlement (BBC, 2017).

On April 26th, the United delivered response to the senators, answering their questions and announcing policy changes (Thomaselli, 2017).

On April 27th, 2017, United CEO announced detailed Review and Action Report (United, 2017f) following United Express Flight 3411 incident. United Airlines announced significant changes of its booking policy and recognized its failures (BBC, 2017).

According to the report (United, 2017f), the United failures related to the United Express Flight 3411 incident include:

1. *„Calling on law enforcement to assist with policy enforcement when a security or safety issue didn't exist. United's policies and procedures in non-safety or security situations did not adequately address instances in which customers refused to comply with requests.*
2. *Rebooking crew at the last minute. The crew was booked and arrived at flight 3411 during the boarding process. Our policies did not prohibit this.*
3. *Offering insufficient compensation and not providing transportation/destination options to entice more customers to give up their seats willingly. Agents did not have the authority to act independently and authorize higher levels of compensation or provide other modes of transportation and/or the right destination options.*
4. *Providing insufficient employee training and empowerment to handle a situation like this. United does not provide regular training to prepare its team for denied boarding situations and individual interactions with customers during these potentially difficult situations“*

Within the report, communicated to the media (BBC, 2017), United announced 10 policy changes „made or forthcoming“ (United, 2017f). The policy changes (Table 4) include:

No.	Policy Change	Effective implementation date
1	United will limit use of law enforcement to safety and security issues only	April 12, 2017
2	United will not require customers already seated on the plane to give up their seat involuntarily unless safety or security is at risk	April 27, 2017
3	United will increase customer compensation incentives for voluntary denied boarding up to \$10,000	April 28, 2017
4	United will establish a customer solutions team to provide agents with creative solutions	June 2017
5	United will ensure crews are booked onto a flight at least 60 minutes prior to departure	April 14, 2017
6	United will provide agents with additional annual training	August 2017
7	United will create an automated system for soliciting volunteers to change travel plans	Later 2017
8	United will reduce its amount of overbooking	Adjusted April 2017
9	United will empower employees to resolve customer service issues in the moment	July 2017 – flight attendants Later 2017 – agents
10	United will eliminate the red tape on lost bags	June 2017

Table 4: United post-crisis policy changes (United, 2017f)

United also repeated the „profound apologies“ (BBC, 2017), stating that the company can „never apologize enough for what occurred and for our initial response that followed. United Airlines takes full responsibility for what happened“ (United, 2017f).

By the end of April, the United stock have recovered and fully returned to the level prior to the crisis occurrence (Figure 5; NYSE (2017)).

Other airlines followed the policy changes made by United and communicated them as well. Delta Airlines also increased its maximum payout to \$9,950 and Southwest Airlines said it will no longer overbook flights (BBC, 2017).

In May 2017, the United Express Flight 3411 incident was a light-motive for the New Yorker front page, depicting President Trump and Attorney General Jeff Sessions dragging former FBI Director James Comey off a plane (New Yorker, 2017).

On June 15th, 2017, United announced expansion of roles for three members of the executive leadership, arguing need for changes with tendency to „build a more customer-centric airline“ (United, 2017g).

In June 2017, less than two months after the crisis, #Flight3411 hashtag is not in the centre of attention of the social media users. The hashtag, which had hundreds of millions of impressions during the peak of the crisis on April 10 and April 11, 2017 (Joyce, 2017), averaged exposure of less than 100 per hour in June 2017 (Ritetag, 2017). The Twitter activity for the hashtag #Flight3411 in June 2017 is shown at the Figure 6.

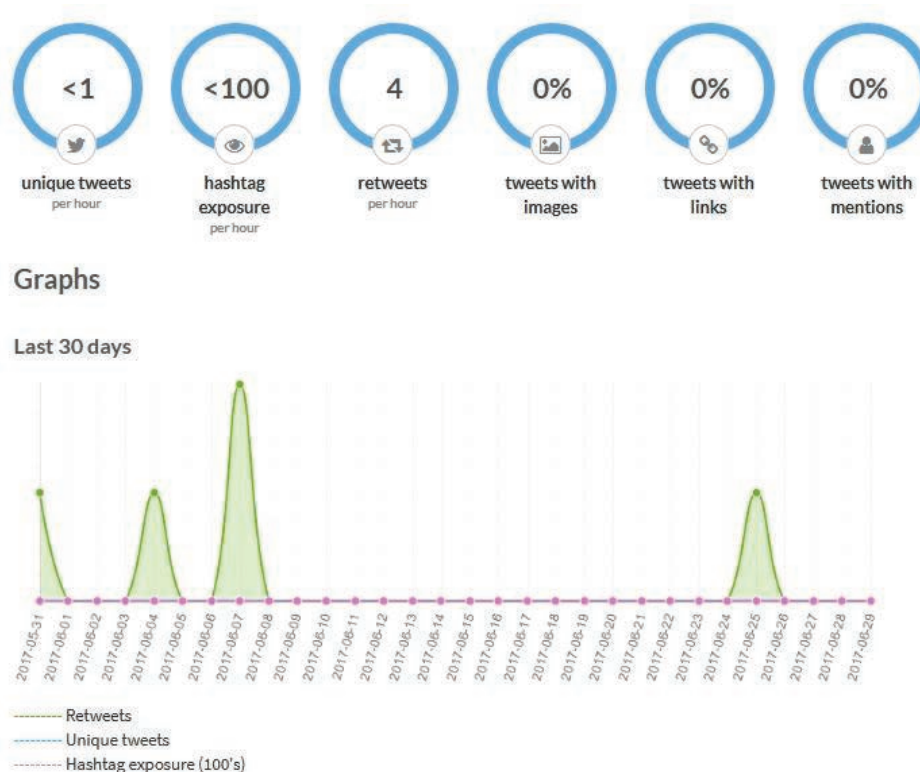


Figure 6: Twitter statistics for hashtag #Flight3411 in June 2017 (Ritetag, 2017)

Findings and Discussion

What approaches and attitudes foster evolution of a paracrisis into the crisis?

As any crisis ignited online, the crisis situation passed through the paracrisis stage prior to its escalation into the crisis. The first hours after posting the video were critical for the appropriate reaction. Prompt reply from the United Airlines to the Twitter users who posted videos, attempting to determine from them what happened (Ohlheiser, 2017) and quick response of the spokesperson to the inquiry of the local news from Louisville (Courier-Journal, 2017), which happened during the paracrisis stage, were general and corporate rather than oriented towards responding to the real crisis issue. United Airlines missed an opportunity to provide proper and proactive response during the paracrisis stage and, consequently, the paracrisis evolved into the crisis.

Even if not notified by the social media team, the United spokesperson, obviously, became aware of the critical incident as soon as the question from the local Louisville news arrived. It is realistic to believe that lack of immediate comprehensive fact-finding actions led to late and inappropriate responses from the company and added fuel to the crisis. In the discovery stage (Pfarrer et al, 2008), United missed an opportunity to communicate findings and apologies related to the incident quickly, proactively and realistically. In the early morning hours, in the late paracrisis stage, United still communicated reactively, responding individually to the numerous tweets mentioning the incident. Although response of the United CEO increased level and duration of the crisis, reactive and deferring approach to online paracrisis by the individuals responsible for crisis communications and online communications in synergy with leaking of the video footages into the news, contributed to quick evolution of a paracrisis into crisis and further spreading out of the crisis at early stage (Figure 7).

Figure 7 shows the timeline of critical moments related to the ignition of the crisis and evolution of a paracrisis into the crisis, along with the mention volume of the United on the social networks (Joyce, 2017).



Figure 7: Critical moments in the early paracrisis/crisis stage, compared with the social networks United mention volume (construct of the authors using data from Joyce, 2017, the timings shown as EST)

Having in mind complexity, severity, and nature of an incident, the answer to the question if the paracrisis could be prevented to evolve is probably negative. It is unknown whether United had the system for examining the paracrisis threat. According to Selakovic (2021) and Coombs and Holladay (2023), the presence of the early recognition system is important for the discovery of possible consequences of online crisis challenges. Regardless of presence of such system, the individuals responsible for crisis communications in the United Airlines should be capable to assess if there could be support for defining the behavior shown in the video as problematic, and to assess if other stakeholders will accept such support (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). The proactive approach, listening to the public’s concerns and understanding the audience, and communicating with compassion, concern, and empathy (Veil et al, 2011) during the short-living paracrisis stage could have a suppressing effect on spreading out of the inevitable crisis. Reactive approach, demonstrated in the occasion of the United Express Flight 3411 incident, directly led to the quick and explosive crisis ignition, while using corporate language, accompanied with the initial denial and later attacking the accuser (Coombs, 2007) led to the crisis extension and escalation in the conventional media. Such approach is surprising, having in mind previous United experience with the paracrisis evolving into a crisis in case of “United breaks guitars”, when the initial inappropriate response to the musician David Carrol’s online complaints led to the crisis (Pang, 2013; Pang et al, 2014).

What crisis response approaches are effective in case of the online-ignited crises?

Analysis of the United crisis communications shows the paradigm was changing through different stages of a crisis. The United Airlines social and conventional media communications approach shifted from the reactive to proactive, while crisis response, analyzed according to the Coombs (2007) model, moved from the denial in the paracrisis and early stage of the crisis, via mix of denial and diminishment, to the rebuilding in the later stages of the crisis and primeses of bolstering, in the aftermath (Table 5).

Date	Crisis maturity stage	Approach to the conventional and social media communication	Type of statement	Coombs (2007) type of the crisis response
Night April 9th/10th	Paracrisis	Reactive	E-mail to the local news Individual Twitter responses	Denial
Morning April 10th	Early crisis	Reactive	Individual Twitter responses	Denial
Daytime April 10th	Escalated crisis	Proactive	CEO's statement	Denial
Afternoon April 10th	Escalated crisis	Proactive	CEO's e-mail to the employees	Denial (attacking the accuser) Diminishment (justification)
April 11th	Escalated crisis	Proactive	CEO's apology	Rebuilding (Apology)
April 12th	Crisis stalemate	Proactive	CEO's appearance in the morning show	Rebuilding (Apology)
April 12	Crisis stalemate	Proactive	Company announcement of the compensation	Rebuilding (Compensation)
April 13th	Suppressed crisis	Proactive	Announcement of policy changes	Rebuilding (Apology)
April 17th	Deteriorated crisis	Proactive	CEO's statement	Rebuilding (Apology)
April 26th	The aftermath	Proactive	Report	Rebuilding (Apology) Bolstering (Reminding)

Table 5: Timeline of the United Express Flight 3411 crisis communication approaches and responses (construct of the authors)

The turning point of the crisis was the United Airlines response shift from denial to the rebuilding. With the apology statement, issued by the CEO on April 11th, United managed to balance the crisis situation and to put the ground for further communication, which, along with the announcement of policy changes, led to the crisis suppression and diminishment. The above described analysis, when compared with the data about social media context presented by Qian (2017) - Figure 8, clearly indicates that the change of the discourse, started with apology statement of the CEO on April 11th, turned the crisis into the stalemate and, accompanied with consistent communication in the rebuilding context, led to the suppression and further deterioration of the crisis.

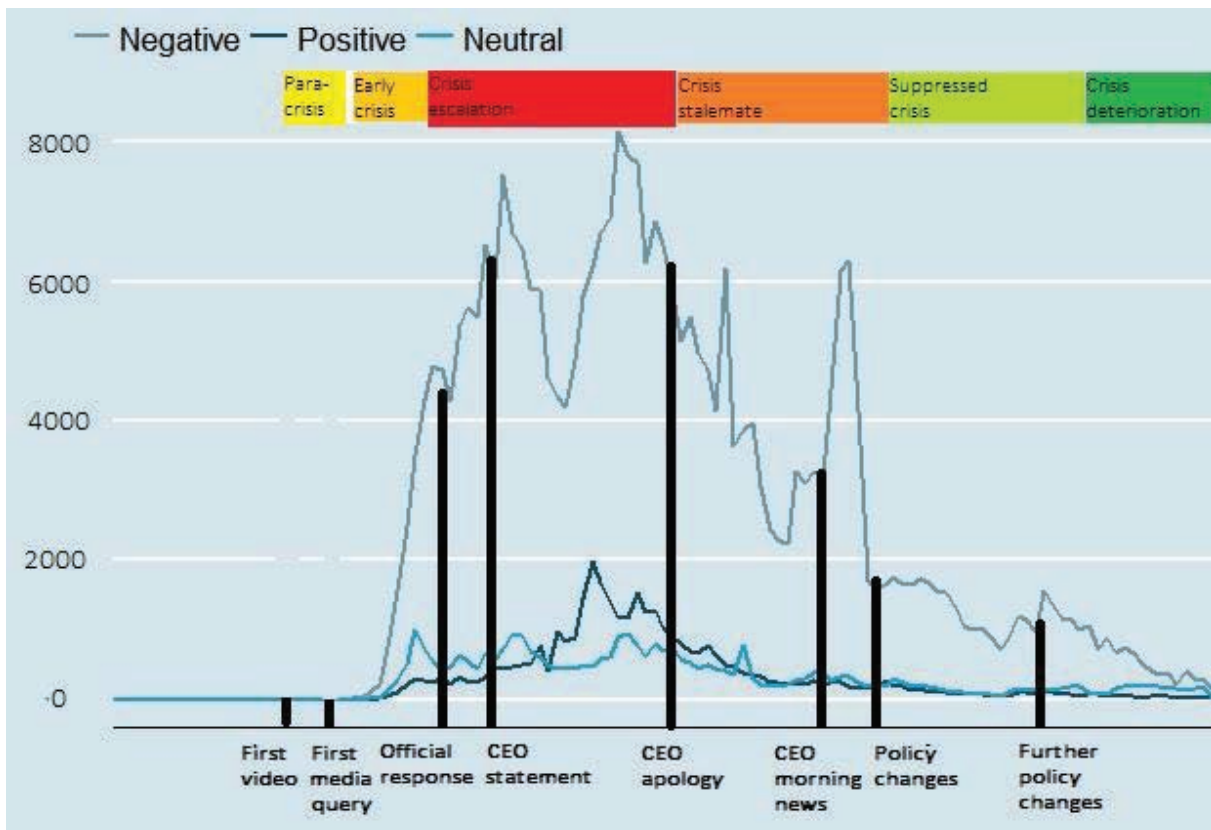


Figure 8: Comparative analysis of the key United responses and Qian (2017) Twitter frequencies during the United Express Flight 3411 crisis – construct of the authors

The proactive approach, accompanied with sincere apologies and rebuilding discourse, seemed to be efficient in this case. Reactive approach and denial did not turn to be effective crisis communication approach.

Can post-crisis communication in case of the online-ignited crises be effective without communicating organizational and policy changes?

The documentary analysis confirmed that change of the communication paradigm during the crisis had significant impact. Although shift from denial to rebuilding enrolled the crisis into the stalemate, apology without the action could not reduce the negative sentiment within the online community (Figure 8). Demonstrated and consistently communicated policy changes, which consequently followed the CEO apology, moved the crisis from the stalemate to the phase of suppression and further deterioration (Table 5; Figure 8).

United post-crisis communications were consistent with the rebuilding messages delivered during the crisis. Quarterly press conference of the United CEO, response to the authorities and official report contained apologies and visible policy changes, demonstrated the shift from the usual stance of the company unpreparedness to handle the crisis in CEO reputation (Zerfass et al, 2016). The report demonstrated that United learned from its mistakes and proved policy changes are already at place, therefore sending an additional convincing message that the crisis like United Express Flight 3411 is not going to happen again. With tangible policy changes, it was possible for communicators to put learning and changes in the centre of the organizational rhetoric and external communications, as Anderson (2013) suggested. In regard to the post-crisis organizational reintegration (Pfarrer et al, 2008), the United actions and report demonstrated clear coverage of all stages – discovery, explanation, penance and rehabilitation (Table 6).

Stage of reintegration (Pfarrer et al, 2008)	Key stakeholder question (Pfarrer et al, 2008)	Organizational action
Discovery	What happened?	The report contains detailed and objective analysis of the incident. The analysis complies with the video footages and witness testimonials (United, 2017f)
Explanation	Why did it happen?	The report contains list of failures of the company which led to the incident. There are neither denial nor “accuse the accuser” responses in the report (United, 2017f)
Penance	How should the organization be punished?	United CEO will not become chairman of the airline, as intended before an incident. Additionally, executive compensation is going to be revised (Wise, 2017)
Rehabilitation	What organizational changes have been made?	The report contains list of the organizational policy changes, clearly indicated which policies are already changed after the incident and which additional policies are going to be implemented further (United, 2017f)

Table 6: Content analysis of the United Express Flight 3411 post-crisis communications in the context of Pfarrer et al. (2008) organizational reintegration - construct of the authors

Findings of the report and changes in the aftermath of the United Express Flight 3411 crisis demonstrate that United used the crisis situation for organizational learning and policy improvement. Organizational and policy changes, as well as tendency to build more customer-centric airline are the focal points of the organizational external communications discourse. Although United Express Flight 3411 started as competence-based crisis, due to severity of the action it has been transformed into the integrity-based crisis immediately after the initial statement of the CEO. Communication changes without demonstrated action in post-crisis communications are like changing curtains on the windows – image restoration after the integrity-based crisis requires structured and coordinated action, in which communication supports the process of changes.

Conclusions

This research has examined how paracrises evolve into crises, how different approaches contributed to the escalation and suppression of the crisis, and how communicating of post-crisis organizational and policy changes contributed to the image restoration. Based on the literature review and United Express Flight 3411 documentary analysis, the following conclusions could be derived:

- Not every paracrisis becomes crisis. In some cases, regardless of the response and communications approach, it is not possible to stop evolution of a paracrisis into the crisis.

- Effects and impacts of online-ignited early crisis situation can be suppressed by taking proactive stance during the paracrisis stage.
- In case of a paracrisis that will inevitably evolve into a crisis, it is vital for an organization to find the facts promptly, identify the appropriate approach and to start proactive communication from the rebuilding posture.
- Unfounded denial in the early stage of the online-ignited crisis contributes to spreading out the crisis, especially in case of the integrity-based crisis with strong attribution of the crisis responsibility.
- Changing the paradigm of the crisis responses during the crisis impacts the flow of the crisis.
- Putting policy and organizational changes into center of the crisis communications discourse can contribute to the crisis suppression and deterioration.
- Post-crisis communication should be consistent with the crisis communication, if crisis responses included announcement of policy and organizational changes.
- In case of public demand for policy or organizational changes during the crisis, centering external communications discourse around policy and organizational changes fosters image restoration of the organization during the post-crisis period, of organization is truly dedicated to performing changes. Without dedication, focusing post-crisis communication on promising organizational action is unlikely to gain the stakeholders` support.

The thesis: “the best way to manage a crisis is to prevent one” (Pang et al, 2014), proved itself true in crisis caused by the United Express Flight 3411 incident. The incident itself, and consequently the entire crisis, could have been avoided if policies and procedures for paracrisis identification and risk mitigation (Selakovic, 2021), situation appraisal, and resolving the overbooking issues, would be at place prior to the critical event. Moreover, the authors believe that this paper can serve as a learning point for communications practitioners and managers to understand the importance of appropriate planning, policy development, organizational learning and efficient and credible communicating in the era of social media and real-time transmission of the information.

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