Negotiating crisis in the Social Media environment: Evolution of crises online, gaining credibility offline

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Citation

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to examine how crises can be triggered online, how different social media tools escalate crises, and how issues gain credibility when they transit to mainstream media.

Design/methodology/approach – This exploratory study uses the multiple case study method to analyze five crises, generated online, throughout their life-cycles, in order to build analytic generalizations (Yin).

Findings – Crises are often triggered online when stakeholders are empowered by social media platforms to air their grievances. YouTube and Twitter have been used to raise issues through its large user base and the lack of gatekeeping. Facebook and blogs escalate crises beyond the immediate stakeholder groups. These crises are covered by mainstream media because of their newsworthiness. As a result, the crises gain credibility offline. Mainstream media coverage ceases when traditional news elements are no longer present.

Research limitations/implications – If crises are increasingly generated online, this study aims to apply a framework to manage the impact on organizations.

Practical implications – How practitioners can use different new media tools to counter crises online and manage the transition of crises to mainstream media.

Originality/value – This is one of the first few studies that analyses how organizational crises originate online, gain traction and get escalated onto mainstream media. Understanding what causes crises to trigger online and gain legitimacy offline will enable practitioners to engage in effective crisis management strategies.

Keywords Case studies, Communication technologies, Crisis management, Communication management, Media, Corporate communications

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The advent of new media technology and prevalent usage of social media platforms have transformed how organizations communicate with stakeholders (Christ, 2007). The World Wide Web is arguably the first mass medium which allows uninterrupted flow of information from source to receiver without any gatekeeping or filtering (White and Raman, 1999). For crisis management, Siah *et al.* (2010, p. 143) noted the rise of social media platforms as a "double-edged sword". While it can be an effective crisis management tool (DiNardo, 2002; Greer and Moreland, 2003; Hagar and

Haythornthwaite, 2005; Hughes *et al.*, 2008; Palen *et al.*, 2009), social media can also serve as platforms where crises can be triggered.

Indeed, social media platforms are increasingly becoming breeding grounds for organizational crises. In the last ten years, incidents of online crises reaching mainstream media have seen a ten-fold increase (Owyang *et al.*, 2011). McGrath (1997) equates one year on the Internet to seven years in any other medium. The rapid evolution of new media technology has seen crisis researchers calling for more research into this burgeoning sphere (see Coombs, 2008).

The pervasiveness of social media has also changed the way mainstream media operates and prioritizes news content. Increasingly, it is becoming more difficult for mainstream media to ignore content originating from social media. The role the social media played during the Boston bombings breaking news – much of which unsubstantiated – had pressured the mainstream media in backpedal mode (Dowd, 2013; Eyal, 2013). Iran's Twitter Revolution is another example where dissidents of the government were able to communicate to the rest of the world through social media even though the mainstream media were barred from reporting on the protests (Valentini and Kruckerberg, 2011). The web-savvy population used Twitter, blogs, mobile phones and other social network tools to spread news of the crisis.

Additionally, as stakeholders have the ability to petition organizations and share their concerns publicly, social media tools have also generated another form of crisis called the paracrisis (Coombs and Holladay, 2012). Paracrisis is defined as "a publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior" (p. 409). Coombs and Holladay (2012, p. 409) argued that the public nature of using social media meant that "other stakeholders have the potential to observe the petitioning" and "this petitioning of the organization is potentially public when it is executed through social media". This has enabled organizations and stakeholders to communicate openly. This heightens the need for crisis managers to understand what works across multiple media platforms. To effectively negotiate crises in social media and respond with appropriate strategies, communication practitioners need to understand, first, how crises are triggered online, how crises are escalated within the social media environment and how crises gain credibility offline when reported in mainstream media.

This paper examines five case studies of crises that originated online, gained momentum on social media platforms before transiting onto mainstream media. It analyses how crises are triggered and get aggravated online and how the crises gain credibility when published in mainstream media. In so doing, it seeks to identify trends and potentially mitigating measures to help practitioners negotiate crisis situations better both online and offline. The significance of this paper is threefold. This is one of the first few studies that analyses how organizational crises originate online, gain traction and get escalated onto mainstream media. This study also identifies compelling new media elements that gain the attention of mainstream media. Third, by understanding what causes crises to trigger online and gain legitimacy offline, we aim to propose a framework for practitioners to engage in effective crisis management strategies.

Literature review

Emergence of social media and crisis escalation in new media

New media technologies share at least three defining features: They are digital, converging, and networked. Being digitalized means that multimedia information can easily be shared, accessed, and interfaced with other "smart" devices and users, which enables the public to interconnect regardless of geographical boundaries or time zones (Goggin and Newell, 2003). User-generated content leads to increased consumer participation and facilitates the free flow of opinions and the sharing of experiences online (Wang and Owyang, 2010). This has leveled the playing field by shifting the command controls of communication from organizations to consumers (Shapiro, 1999). Information and conversations online are no longer controlled top-down by governments, mainstream media, and organizations (George, 2012). Individuals empowered by social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, and blogs are able to take on giant corporations successfully (Bernoff and Li, 2008). "Netizens", "citizen journalists", bloggers and social media influencers are emerging as important stakeholders whom practitioners need to engage (Freberg *et al.*, 2011).

Siah *et al.* (2010) argued that the rise of social media enabled crises to be escalated. First, the Internet allows news to travel to a wider audience at an exponential rate. The authors found that bad news could be spread rapidly, within minutes. Second, social media have become diffused and people have adapted to it like fish to water. Content could be downloaded and uploaded to other popular forums, spreading quickly through blogs, e-mails and chat rooms by different people (Siah *et al.*, 2010, p. 149). Third, there are relatively low-entry barriers, and this has made it a very accessible to all. Siah *et al.* (2010, p. 149) argued, "This explains why when the crises were reported in online media, more people became aware of them and even helped perpetuate them by circulating them further". Thus, Siah *et al.* (2010, p. 143) found that the very characteristics that make social media unique, such as user interactivity, multimedia capability and lack of gatekeeping are "also its Achilles heel". Social media offer alternative sources of news and information. It could also lead to the spread of inaccurate information, spoofs and "spin-offs" (Ho *et al.*, 2011).

The types of crises that organizations face in this social media age can be any of these posited by Hilse and Hoewner (1998):

- Reinforcing crisis: used as an additional channel to present stakeholder opinions.
- Absurd crisis: rumors or absurd theories and opinions about a topic or organization.
- Affecting crisis: when organizations are critically scrutinized by stakeholders and they become the subject of public discussion with negative impact.
- Competence crisis: this can be characterized by a difference in competences between the stakeholder and the organization. This blows over online with online experts joining in the discussion.

As the crises gain momentum online, it becomes hyped up (Pang, 2013). Arguably, social media hype, defined as netizen-generated hype that causes a huge interest in the social media spheres, triggered by a key event and sustained by the self-reinforcing quality in its ability for users to engage in discussion, exists even before news evolves into media hype (Pang, 2013). Media hype is defined as a "media-generated,

wall-to-wall news wave, triggered by one specific event and enlarged by the self-reinforcing processes within the news production of the media" (Vasterman, 2005, p. 515). Thus, this study seeks to examine:

RQ1. How do organizational crises originate online and how do they get escalated within social media?

Sourcing stories from social media by mainstream media
Given that social media can break news stories before traditional media, in many cases, they provide the platform for mainstream media to follow suit.

Journalism in the social media age has been described as one that relies heavily on information technology, interactive and adheres to an unforgiving 24/7 news cycle (Beckett and Mansell, 2008; Boczkowski, 2004; Deuze, 2003). The news-gathering process has also shifted from a linear to a networked process whereby there is constant communication and interaction with sources and reactors. Jenkins (2006, p. 3) described the emergence of a participatory culture in journalism where content producers and media audiences have moved from occupying distinct separate roles to being "participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us [yet] fully understand". The internet has empowered audiences by providing them with new and additional avenues of generating information (Kiesow, 2010; Skoler, 2009; Sonderman, 2012).

Skoler (2009, p. 39) argued that journalists now needed to use social media platforms to "establish relationship[s] and listen to others". Poindexter (2012, p. 27) listed the dimensions where the new generation consumes news: accessibility, perpetual updating, search-ability, share-ability, link ease and reliability, comment-ability, contribute-ability, and coolness, amongst others. Mainstream media has also begun emphasizing content that is sourced from social media platforms to show that it is keeping up with the times. Kristensen and Mortensen (2013) found amateurs breaking stories during war that were eventually used by the media. During the Iranian street protests that followed elections there in 2009, Newman (2009) observed that mainstream media emphasized information that emerged from social media and monitored the flurry of activities on Twitter, Facebook, and the blogosphere. Even though censorship was widespread during the protests, social media tools enabled information to flow freely, changing the way news makers and news producers communicate and interact (Valentini and Kruckerberg, 2011). Another study of the 2009 Iranian elections found that social media as a newsgathering tool was used either as a source (21 percent), a topic (27 percent), a mention (44 percent), or topic and source (8 percent) (Knight, 2012).

Jordaan's (2013, p. 29) studies of two South African weeklies found that journalists that actively used social media to "keep abreast of general trends in the news and in society", as well as the "realities created by their audiences" (Jordaan, 2013, p. 30). Broersma and Graham (2012) found that journalists used social media like Twitter to obtain information about stories. "Social networks can be regarded as huge pools of 'collective intelligence'... [J]ournalists can use this 'wisdom of the crowd' to gather information quickly..." (Broersma and Graham, 2012, p. 404). Some journalists, Broersma and Graham (2012, p. 405) further argued, had turned covering the social media as a "beat" where journalists become part of the network for the purposes of sourcing stories. A Global Digital Journalism Study 2012 found increasing evidence

that journalists are treating social media channels as sources of news. Globally, more than half (54 percent) of journalists surveyed used microblogging updates, and 44 percent accessed blogs they already knew to sources for stories (Oriella PR Network, 2012). Lariscy *et al.* (2009) found that business journalists could use social media for surveillance or investigate a rumor or negative news story.

Mainstream media's coverage of stories from social media
However, mainstream media do not always follow the agenda that was discussed in the social media. In a study conducted by Silver (2011) on the Occupy Wall Street protests, it was found that while social media space had accorded consistent coverage throughout the duration of the protests, most mainstream media outlets, in fact, ignored the event. Coverage intensified after the protestors had clashed with the police. A study conducted by Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism found that only 2 percent of tweets from news consumers were used to attain information regarding a story or gain feedback (Holcomb and Mitchell, 2011). Thus, while mainstream media continue to monitor social media content, arguably, coverage appeared to be largely dependent on the proscribed set of journalistic values and newsworthiness. George (2012, p. 179) argued that professional journalists' advantage is their "discipline of verifying information with multiple sources, institutional memory to sense when things are more complex that they seem, and higher order judgment honed by experience and specialized beat knowledge". US President Barack Obama, when commenting on the proliferation of information online surrounding the Boston bombing in 2013, reminded the mainstream media of its responsibilities. "In this age of instant reporting and tweets and blogs, there's a temptation to latch on to any bit of information. But when a tragedy like this happens, with public safety at risk and stakes so high, it's important that we do this right. That's why we have investigations. That's why we relentlessly gather the facts" (Brady, 2013).

The question, thus, for journalists is credibility of the news accessed through social media, particularly from sources they are not familiar with. However, if they find sufficient reason to report on stories first surfaced in social media, like in times of crises where people engage in attributing responsibility and causes spontaneously and intensively (Schwartz, 2012), the stories would gain traction as credible once they are subjected to journalistic rigor and scrutiny. Lariscy *et al.* (2009, p. 316) found that even though social media does not set the agenda for coverage in mainstream media, journalists "do not appear opposed to it". This study, thus, examines,

RQ2. How did the crises gain credibility when reported in mainstream media and how did the mainstream media cover the issues differently?

How do organizations manage new media crises?
Several approaches have been offered at the contextual level. Jin and Liu (2010) developed the blog-mediated crisis communication model to help communication professionals monitor the blogosphere and respond to influential bloggers. Austin *et al.* (2012) proposed the social-mediated crisis communication model to understand how audiences use social media during crises, mainly to get insider information and connecting with friends and relatives. There were also studies that examined the use of different social media tools. For instance, Waters *et al.* (2009) examined how non-profit organizations used Facebook to engage stakeholders. Briones *et al.* (2011) examined

how the American Red Cross used different social media tools to build relationships. Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith's (2008) model provided a framework to combat online threats. This model extrapolated potential online threats on a crisis life cycle from issues management and strategic planning to crisis communication and post-crisis management. Siah *et al.* (2010) extended Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith's (2008) model by integrating it with the contingency theory of strategic conflict management (Pang *et al.*, 2010) and Wilcox and Cameron's (2009) conflict life cycle to develop the new media crisis communication model. Consistently, scholars have argued that social media needed to be incorporated into crisis planning and response (see Palenchar and Veil, 2011).

Beyond the contextual level, organizations can employ a variety of textual devices to respond. The image repair theory is one. Described as the "dominant paradigm for examining corporate communication in times of crises" (Dardis and Haigh, 2009, p. 101), the theory has been applied to analyse how organizations repair its image during a crisis. It is divided into five major typologies (Benoit and Pang, 2008).

(1) *Denial* has two variants: simple denial or shifting the blame to another party.

(2) *Evasion of responsibility*: The second major typology is evasion of responsibility. The first variant is provocation, where one reacts by responding it was egged on to do so. The second is defeasibility, when one argues one does not have enough information and control. The third is accident, where one argues that the crisis happened unintentionally. Last is good intention, where one argues that the offensive act was done with good intentions.

(3) *Reducing offensiveness*. The third major typology is reducing offensiveness. One can do so by bolstering, which seeks to highlight one's positive traits. Minimization strategies can also be used to reduce the severity of the situation. Differentiation strategies seek to reduce offensiveness by suggesting that the act was less offensive than perceived. Transcendence strategies seek to place the situation at a higher level, with more important concerns. Attacking the accuser seeks to reduce the credibility of the accusations. Compensation strategy is where those responsible decide to offer something of value to the victims.

(4) *Corrective action*. The fourth typology aims to reassure stakeholders that such crisis situations would not reoccur.

(5) *Mortification*. The final typology is when one admits its mistake and seeks forgiveness.

Both the contextual and textual approaches, however, do not shed light on how crises are transit from social media to mainstream media and back to social media and how organizations can manage this. A veteran journalist commented, "The thing is, in the digital age, nothing dies. The MSM (mainstream media) may decide to 'end' public discussion but online, news will surface and old news rehashed and sometimes passed off as new" (Henson, 2013). Thus, this study examines:

RQ3. How did organizations respond and what was the impact to the respective organizations' reputation?

Method

The purpose of case studies is to empirically investigate a "contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" and address a "situation in which the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 1993, p. 59). Wimmer and Dominick (1997) asserted that case studies are time-tested means of evaluating business practices. For this exploratory study, we employ the multiple case study method as this approach allows detailed documentation of a relatively new phenomenon. This method is most suitable for research questions that require detailed understanding of social and organizational processes because of the rich data collected in context (Hartley, 2004). Case studies generally include multiple methods such as participant observation, focus groups and documentary analysis. For this research, the cases are analyzed in detail through detailed documentary analysis.

Data collection: the cases

The five cases studied were the crises facing Dell (2005); Domino's (NBC, 2009), United (2009), Southwest Airlines, and Singapore politician Grace Fu (see the Appendix for full description of each crisis).

Data analysis

Following the case study selection, we collected and analyzed four sets of data. The first three sets of data were used to qualitatively track the life cycle of each crisis and organizational response. The fourth set of data was used to examine the long term impact of the crises on the respective organizations after they were blown over.

Data set 1: Internet documents such as blog postings, Facebook comments, Twitter updates, and YouTube videos were searched online. Documentation by journalists, commentators, and bloggers online with screen shots of the original Twitter and Facebook posts were available for analysis. On average, there were between 10 and 15 original social media posts and between 15 and 20 news articles per case available online. This set of data was used to track the life cycle of the crises, i.e. the trigger event, public reaction, transition to mainstream media and back. The overall tone of postings and updates on social media helped to gauge public sentiments.

Data set 2: News reports from major news publications and news agencies on the crises were sourced from the Factiva database. News sources were limited to English-language newspapers, and the duration limited to a period of six months after the first news article was published. News coverage was generally localized in nature as media operating closest to the incident area were the first to cover the news and they covered it prominently compared to wire agencies. For instance, for the Singapore politician case, the Singapore English daily and newspaper of record (Cheong, 2013), *The Straits Times*, was accessed.

The objective was to track the follow-up coverage and other related news after the crisis subsided. This data was used to analyze mainstream media coverage of the crises. The data was categorized into prominent news elements, the portrayal of the affected parties and how much information was taken off social media by the mainstream media.

Data set 3: Online posts, press announcements and documents that originated from the organization or individuals involved. Organizational response was used to analyze the actions and stances taken by the organizations and individuals involved in the

crises. Both online and offline documents, i.e. what was discussed on social media platforms and the mainstream media, were reviewed to better understand the organizational constraints and the effects of the crises communication strategies.

Data set 4: These were financial statements and annual reports on the respective organizations to examine how the crises had impacted the organizations and what lessons the organizations learnt from the crises. Analyses were done on the annual revenue figures of the organizations in the year before, the year during the crisis and the year(s) after, to evaluate if the social media crisis had a significant adverse financial impact.

Data analysis
The data analysis for data sets 1 to 3 was conducted according to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) constant comparative method for inductive data analysis. According to Glazer and Strauss (1967) the constant comparative method follows four distinct stages:

(1) comparing incidents in each category;

(2) integrating the categories;

(3) delimiting the theory and

(4) writing the theory.

This method combines the categorization of the themes with a "simultaneous comparison of all social incidents observed," (Goetz and LeCompte, 1981, p. 58). As the data is recorded and classified into themes, they are also compared across all the categories (Dye *et al.*, 2000).

The data was analyzed according to the following steps, based on Dye et al's (2000) stages: First, a unitizing process was carried out by noting each statement, counter-statements and organizational responses available in the documents collected; second, statements and responses alluding to similar observations were noted and grouped together; third, the data was constantly refined and integrated to identify consistent observations pertaining to each research question and four, the process was repeated until no new patterns or themes were identified. The findings were then presented according to the observations that emerged. The data was constantly compared against the already established generic observations. For instance, when the Singapore politician posted her post on Facebook, it went viral with many netizens commenting against her views and some in support. The comments across Facebook Twitter and blogs were analyzed in batches to identify common themes. The comments and posts were categorized as behavior of a politician, disconnect with ground sentiments, portraying an elitist mentality and a relatively smaller number of supportive comments. Likewise, the same process was applied when analyzing news articles for inherent news values for coverage.

To analyze organizational response, textual analysis, which has been the prevalent and primary method of analysis in image repair studies, was used (Benoit, 2000). Data set 4 was accessed to understand the impact of the crises on each organization. From the financial reports, there was no conclusive evidence over the financial impact that the respective social media crises had on the various organizations. Organizations also did not report the specifics of the crises in their annual reports. However, for Dell and

Domino's, there were evidences within the annual reports which suggested that the crises may have some impact on their general management strategies.

Findings and discussion

The first research question examined how did organizational crises originate online and how did they get escalated within social media.

Dissonance shared virally, resonance with negative experiences

The crises were triggered and escalated by new media's power to reach a large population within a short span of time (Siah *et al.*, 2010). As with social media platforms, sharing of user-generated content via YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and blogs, enabled and empowered more people with the capacity to demonstrate their unhappiness with the organization, and create organizational crises. Video content tended to have a higher and faster reach compared to text-based postings and updates. For instance, in the crisis facing Domino's, the two rogue workers at a Domino's Pizza unit – Kristy Lynn Hammonds and Michael Anthony Setzer – in North Carolina filmed themselves putting cheese in their nose and other stomach-turning acts with food that were to be delivered to customers, and then posted it on YouTube in April 2009. In a single day after the video was uploaded, the video went viral and received 760,000 views (York, 2009). Even though the original video was removed, numerous reproductions have been made and were still circulating years after the incident happened (ebonygentleman79, 2009). Social networking platforms such as Twitter and Facebook were instrumental in it going viral beyond the initial YouTube audience and aggravating the crisis. Numerous reproductions of the same video made by both individuals and news organizations were uploaded on YouTube, adding to the search list under the term "Dirty Dominoes". For example, someone used the original video and edited into a clip titled "How to get fired from Domino's Pizza (www.youtube.com/watch?v = 1D9PikBzNNo). Similarly, in the crisis facing United, Dave Carroll's video for the song "United Breaks Guitars'" was posted on the popular file-sharing site Monday night and had received more than 600,000 hits by Thursday evening ("United Breaks Guitar Surpasses 3 Million views in 10 day", Mashable, 2009). He also received thousands of emails and a flood of friend requests on Facebook that boosted his popularity online and offline. The spoof music video garnered more than three million hits in ten days (Mashable, 2009). The song "United Breaks Guitars" went on to be one of 2009's YouTube hits and has garnered more than seven million hits even after the crisis blew over ("United Loses Millions on Social Media", Social Media Risk, 2010).

By and large, the accusations against the organization/individual initially stemmed from netizens' subjective views. However, if the accusation that was circulated online resonated with pre-existing negative experiences with the organization/individual experienced by other stakeholders or if it reinforced a pre-existing negative view held of the organization, it was more likely to be shared and escalated. Even if other stakeholders do not believe in the accusations, the issues could get viral if there is a significant novelty factor, such as in cases which involve celebrities, or if there are human interest elements in the content of in the delivery of the message. For instance, in the crisis facing Dell, the crisis was escalated through Jarvis' blog, Buzzmachine.com, which, at one point, received close to 10,000 visits a day

(Leonard, 2006). Jarvis' first post on 21 June 2005 received about 250 comments, all of which were written by other consumers who had been on the receiving end of Dell's customer service. His third post started with: "Well my Dell hell continues . . . ." which made the term "Dell Hell" synonymous with Jarvis' encounter with Dell (Jarvis, 2005b). His subsequent posts about his exchanges with Dell received hundreds of responses, and averaged between 200 and 400 comments per post. On 11 July 2005, Jarvis posted his final Dell Hell rant (Jarvis, 2005a). Discussion about Dell's poor customer service continued throughout the summer of 2005 when mainstream media published the story.

Similarly, in the crisis facing Southwest Airlines, after Hollywood movie producer Kevin Smith was sent off the flight as he did not fulfill the policy where passengers who could not fit safely and comfortably in one seat with armrests down had to purchase an additional seat ("Kevin Smith too fat to fly", Economist, 2010), Smith went on a rampage of tweets about his negative experience to his more than 1.6 million followers on his twitter account ("Too fat to fly. The Kevin Smith situation", Economist, 2010). Facebook comments, postings and links to Smith's tweets further aggravated the crisis by spreading the word beyond his fan base instigated debate on the blogosphere regarding the "customer of size" policy (McEwan, 2010). The crisis involving the Singapore politician was triggered when Grace Fu's Facebook posting drew instant criticism online and went viral as netizens started sharing and commenting on the posting on Facebook, blogs and microblog sites. Within a single day, her posting drew more than a thousand comments on her facebook account – mainly criticisms (Hoe, 2012). A dedicated microblog site was created on Tumblr http://whenimadethedecision.tumblr.com/ to post the best memes, where the term "Fu-isms" was coined. Her status update was also reposted by several prominent bloggers. Table I sums up how the crises were triggered and escalated online.

The second research question examined how did the crises gain credibility when reported in mainstream media and how did the mainstream media cover the issues differently?

Cases	Where crisis originated?	Where it escalated?	How fast did it escalate?	Why did it escalate?
Dell l	Blogs	Discussion forums	Over a period of 20 days	Resonance with negative experience
Domino's	Youtube	Blogs, twitter, Facebook	1 day	Visual impact, numerous reproductions of video
United	Youtube	Blogs, twitter, Facebook	3 days	Audio visual
Southwest Airlines	Twitter	Facebook, blogs	1 day	Celebrity, visual impact
Singapore politician	Facebook	Twitter, blogs	1 day	Public figure, dissonance with views

Table I.
How crises originated and escalated on social media

Mainstream media coverage restricted, based on newsworthiness criteria
Coverage on the mainstream media appeared generally more objective and balanced and they were usually triggered by the inherent news elements rather than the issues that were being raised on social media. These were dependent on news elements, such as novelty (United), celebrity factor (Southwest Airlines), impact on society at large (Singapore politician), human interest (Dell), relevance to public (Domino's) and regulations (Domino's). The mainstream media, as an agenda setter, presented public issues of concern for public debate – food safety and employment guidelines (Domino's), ministerial salary review (Singapore politician), consumer protection (United and Dell) and discrimination (Southwest Airlines). They did not report on personal vendettas that social media can veer towards. They also appeared to monitor developments online before plunging into the story.

For instance, in the crisis facing Dell, the mainstream media covered the crisis about a month after Jarvis posted his first rant ("Dell in dust up over online support", Dell, 2007). In the interim, there were some online media reports on smaller, online web news portals that mainly linked bloggers (Jarvis, 2005a). About three weeks after Jarvis's first Dell rant, Dell shut down its customer care board on its community forum. Another incident that interested the mainstream media was Jarvis's email to one of Dell's senior executives and his open letter dated 17 August to Michael Dell and Dell CMO Michael George, in which he lamented their lack of response and offered suggestions on how Dell could better interact with bloggers. The mainstream media, including BusinessWeek, Fast Company, ZDNet, PC World, and the Houston Chronicle, covered the story factually and focused on the conflict between Jarvis and Dell as well as how this conflict resulted in a tangible drop in sales for Dell. For example, *Business Week* described this saga as a sign of the company's troubles and attributed the disappointing revenue and falling stock prices to the declining levels of customer satisfaction (Lee, 2005). Similarly, in the crisis facing Domino's, the mainstream media started reporting on the incident after the two employees were fired and charges were officially filed (Crowe, 2009). The mainstream media's coverage focused on the charges that were filed against the two errant employees and their respective backgrounds, not the discriminatory video. Coverage also focused on one of the offenders being a former registered sex offender. NBC News' coverage, for example, was in favor of the Domino's by focusing on the immediate response made by Domino's. At the same time, they also emphasized that none of the food depicted in the video was actually delivered ("Dirty Domino's workers charged for prank, NBC, 2009). Subsequent follow-up news coverage focused more on issues such as the recruitment policies of organizations and the general impact of social media**.** In the crisis facing United, the first news report appeared on 9 July 2009, three days after the music video was first uploaded on 6 July 2009. The coverage in the mainstream media focused primarily on the unprecedented success of the video and exploited the human interest element of using music to get messages across. For example, the *Guardian* newspaper called it Carroll's "biggest hit" ever ("Singer gets his revenge on United Airlines and soars to fame", *Guardian*, 2009). United was portrayed as an inefficient operator who did not have the ability to ensure a safe passage for Carroll's guitar. The *Guardian* news article further highlighted that United "could have spared itself this public relations humiliation if it had followed its own policy on customer service" ("Singer gets his revenge on United Airlines and soars to fame", *Guardian*, 2009).

In the crisis facing Southwest Airline, even though the mainstream media covered the story a day after Smith's twitter updates ("Kevin Smith too fat to fly", Economist, 2010), its initial focus was on the personality involved. Subsequently, it discussed the validity of the existing flight policy. For example, ABC News discussed the issue of discrimination against larger sized customers and quoted views from air travel experts ("Kevin Smith too fat to fly", Economist, 2010). The coverage tapered off after two weeks, but references to the Kevin Smith case continued to be made in reports after similar incidents on the same issue emerged later.

In turn, the organizations and the individuals involved were asked for their response to counter what was said online and to state their positions clearly. Pang (in press) argued that the information vacuum created allowed other stakeholders the opportunity to frame the issues separately. Issues can gain traction in the mainstream media if a suitable or prompt response was not taken to contest the accusation online or if the response to the issue was not sufficient to reduce the dissonance or negative experience experienced by stakeholders to the issue. For instance, in the crisis facing the Singapore politician, Fu's original Facebook post was posted at 9:41 pm on 4 January 2012. She clarified her comments about 20 hours later at 5.15 pm on 5 January 2012 (Wong, 2012). Following the online furore from her first post, the mainstream media covered the event first as a side comment on 5 January 2012 with the ministerial pay issue, and then covered the online comments that were made on 6 January 2012 as an individual report. The Singapore national daily, *The Straits Times,* ran the headline – "Ministers salary review: Online sparks over Facebook postings" (http://sglinks.com/pages/2387117-online-sparks-grace-fu-s-facebook-posting), while tabloid, *The New Paper* used the headline "Grace Fu's comments upset some netizens" (www.asiaone.com/News/Latest%2BNews/Singapore/Story/A1Story20120106-320 317/4.html). While the mainstream media's coverage of this crisis died down after first two days, subsequent commentaries – online and offline – published regarding the ministerial pay issues and never failed to mention the Grace Fu episode. By 15 January, there were no new headlines on the criticism, but the criticism continued online, albeit without the original gusto.

Once the newsworthiness of the crisis faded, the mainstream media lost interest and coverage tapered off even as they transited back to cybersphere. However, the mainstream media may make references to the same crises should a similar issue resurface later. Reference to past crises when reporting current crisis is a form of context setting (Fearn-Banks, 2011). Table II sums up the findings.

Figure 1 illustrates how crisis transits from social media to mainstream and back to social media.

The third research question examined how did the organizations respond in each of these crises and what was the impact to organizational reputation. To ensure easier reading, the image repair strategies used are highlighted in italics. To answer this question, we examine each case first and draw inferences from all the cases.

Reduce offensiveness with mitigating responses
Crisis facing Dell. Dell remained silent throughout Jarvis' rants. Dell's policy was to observe what went on but took a hands-off approach with regards to engagement online. Experts commented that Dell did not take blogging seriously then because it considered the blogosphere to be a fairly new medium. This further outraged the

Cases	Why was it an issue in social media?	Why did mainstream media cover it (newsworthiness)?	Estimated length of time mainstream media covered it
Dell	Resonance with negative experience	Conflict, drop in sales, emergence of social media	1 month
Domino's	Outrageous behaviour, issue of food safety	Crime, conflict, food safety	1 week
United	Customer dissatisfaction	Novelty, success of viral video	1 week
Southwest Airlines	Unhappiness with seat; discriminatory treatment	Human interest: Hollywood director	1 week
Singapore politician	Public figure, dissonance with public sentiments	Currency, celebrity	2-3 days

Table II.
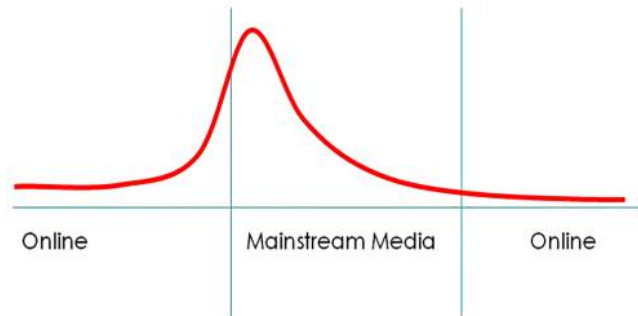How crises gained credibility through mainstream media

Figure 1.
Crisis life cycle – social media and mainstream media

bloggers because they claimed that Dell was not "listening" to the conversation online or reacting to customers' dissatisfaction. About two months after Jarvis' first rant, a Dell public relations representative called Jarvis to talk about his Dell experience and company policies, but failed to engage unhappy customers online. As a result, Dell's reputation began to plummet.

In subsequent years, even though figures showed Dell's revenue climbed in subsequent years after the crisis, from US$49,205 million in 2005 to US$55,908 million (+14 percent) in 2006, US$57,420 million (+3 percent) in 2007 and US$61,133 million (+6 percent) in 2008 (Dell fiscal in review, 2004-2008), the organization alluded to the need to prevent crisis like the one it experienced from happening. In its annual report in 2006, it wrote, "We improved Dell's overall customer experience considerably in fiscal 2006, including a decline in the rate of service contacts measured against systems under warranty. We enhanced products and services, reduced organizational complexity and made substantial investments in capacity, technology and people – from new customer contact centers and an innovative remote software tool called TechConnect to 2,500 additional Dell on Call service professionals . . ." (Dell, 2007, p. 3). In 2007, it wrote, "We have re-examined our entire design process to improve our speed-to-market so that we can get the products that customers want in their hands

even more quickly than we do today. . . The most critical test with customers, however, is finding better ways to respond to them when they need help. Customer service and support teams are the key to resolving customer issues the first time. We have added thousands of new support team members in all regions, trained them to fix a broader range of complex issues . . . " (Chairman and CEO Michael Dell's annual letter to customers, partners, shareholders and colleagues, Dell, 2007).

In 2012, seven years later, Dell has emerged as one of the pioneers of online engagement, a classic case of how one can learn from crisis (Ulmer *et al.*, 2007) where processes are reviewed and new competitive procedures are introduced. This incident has become a classic example to quote and take cues from when analyzing the impact of new media on businesses.

Crisis facing Domino's. Domino's responded about 48 hours later. The videos were posted on Monday night; a response didn't come from the company until Wednesday. While its internal team worked quickly to form a strategy on Tuesday, its initial response was to try not to unnecessarily draw attention to the video because it didn't want to alert more people to the crisis. It did eventually open a Twitter account to deal with consumer inquiries and then made an apology through YouTube. However, the damage was already done. In a research conducted later found that 65 percent of respondents who would previously visit or order Domino's Pizza were less likely to do so after viewing the offending video (Flandez, 2009).

In subsequent years, even though Domino's earned revenue of US$87.9 million in 2010, a 10.3 percent increase over its 2009's US$79.7 million, Domino's appeared to recognize its mistake and sought to make amends. The Chairman and CEO David A. Brandon wrote, ". . .We were honest and transparent with our consumers. We admitted that we had disappointed some consumers in the past with our pizza quality and we took this issue seriously. Having been known for service and value for nearly 50 years, we are now going to be known for great pizza, too. This news not only pushed our domestic sales solidly into positive territory, it starts a new chapter for our brand as we begin 2010 . . . " ("To our shareholders", 2009, p. 7).

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

However, the crisis did not seem to have much impact on United. In the subsequent year, 2010, its revenue continue its climb, from US$651 million in 2009, an increase of 87.8 percent over 2008, to US$253 million (+139 percent) in 2010 (Form 10-K, 2010).

Crisis facing Southwest Airlines. Southwest Airlines *engaged the strategy of mortification* and issued an apology to Kevin Smith via Twitter and its website, which was titled "Not So Silent Bob", a jovial jab at the Silent Bob character that Smith played in his films. The statement read: "We would like to echo our tweets and again offer our heartfelt apologies to you. . . Our pilots... made the determination that Mr. Smith needed more than one seat to complete the flight" (McNeill, 2010). *The apology was accompanied by the strategy of reducing offensiveness* where the organization offered the director a $100 voucher and that it would accommodate him on a later flight.

Compared to the rest of the crises, the reputation damage was marginal as the crisis evolved around an existing policy which Smith was very well aware and familiar with as he had experience purchasing two seats to travel.

Even though Southwest suffered a 61 percent drop in revenue in 2011 (from US$459 million to US$178 million), evidence was not conclusive that it was because of this crisis.

Crisis facing Singapore politician. The online furore over the original post led Fu to clarify her views. *She employed the strategy of reducing offensiveness through bolstering.*
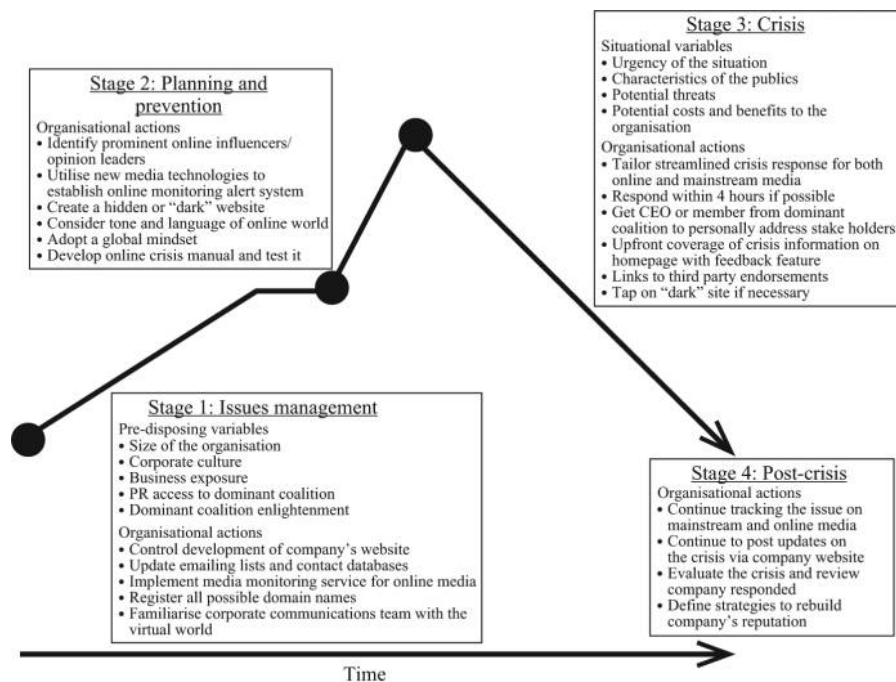
"Thank you all for your candid views. I respect all of them. I realize my last posting could have been misunderstood. The committee has done a thorough job with a substantial recommendation over a fairly emotive topic. I accept and respect the recommendation" (Wong, 2012). Aside from the clarification made on Facebook, Fu did not make any further responses. The crisis did not seem to impact Ms Fu. Months later, she was promoted to full Minister, the second female to be made minister in Singapore's history (Lim, 2012).

What we can infer: Damage to reputation can be mitigated if a prompt response is enacted on the same social media platforms that had escalated the issue, mainly through reducing offensiveness. While a timely response strategy may not stop issues from being escalated onto the mainstream media, it presents an opportunity for the mainstream media to report this as objectively as it should, thus minimizing the impact to reputation. Issues may continue to fester on the social media even after mainstream media cease coverage if stakeholders are not satisfied with the position taken by the organization. However, the issue may die a natural death if stakeholders are satisfied with the organization's response.

Given these findings, the critical question remains: What can practitioners do in response to similar crisis situations? We integrate insights from recent research with the New Media Crisis Communications Model posited by Siah *et al.* (2010) and indicate the key ideas at each phase (see Figure 2).

Issues management phase
- Identify the stakeholders, opinion leaders, and relevant social media platforms.
- Identify key social media influencers (SMIs) who are independent third party endorsements that can shape audience attitudes through new media (Freberg *et al.*, 2011).
- Integrate social media platforms into organizational stakeholders' management plans (Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith, 2008; Palenchar and Veil, 2011; Siah *et al.*, 2010).
- Understand how to effectively use the tools that are available to them (DiStaso *et al.*, 2011; Lovejoy *et al.*, 2012).
- Engage in dialogic communication with stakeholders (Jin and Liu, 2010; Waters *et al.*, 2009).

Stage 2: Planning and prevention

Organisational actions
- Identify prominent online influencers/ opinion leaders
- Utilise new media technologies to establish online monitoring alert system
- Create a hidden or "dark" website
- Consider tone and language of online world
- Adopt a global mindset
- Develop online crisis manual and test it

Stage 3: Crisis

Situational variables
- Urgency of the situation
- Characteristics of the publics
- Potential threats
- Potential costs and benefits to the organisation

Organisational actions
- Tailor streamlined crisis response for both online and mainstream media
- Respond within 4 hours if possible
- Get CEO or member from dominant coalition to personally address stake holders
- Upfront coverage of crisis information on homepage with feedback feature
- Links to third party endorsements
- Tap on "dark" site if necessary

Stage 1: Issues management

Pre-disposing variables
- Size of the organisation
- Corporate culture
- Business exposure
- PR access to dominant coalition
- Dominant coalition enlightenment

Organisational actions
- Control development of company's website
- Update emailing lists and contact databases
- Implement media monitoring service for online media
- Register all possible domain names
- Familiarise corporate communications team with the virtual world

Stage 4: Post-crisis

Organisational actions
- Continue tracking the issue on mainstream and online media
- Continue to post updates on the crisis via company website
- Evaluate the crisis and review company responded
- Define strategies to rebuild company's reputation

Time

Source: Siah *et al.* (2010)

Figure 2.
New media crisis
communication model

Planning and prevention phase

- Develop a risk matrix to prioritize crisis threats. Coombs and Holladay (2012, p. 408) argued that "crisis prevention is the 'alpha' or starting point of crisis management and crisis communications".

- Diagnose if crisis is paracrisis (Coombs and Holladay, 2012) or a real crisis. This can be done by assessing a collage of factors: the likely magnitude, attribution of responsibility, nature of the stakeholders, urgency of the threat, impact on business, and opportunity to influence (Coombs, 2010; Pang *et al.*, 2010; Wilcox and Cameron, 2009).

- Understand the potential impact by asking these questions: News value – Are there inherent news values in the crisis to trigger coverage in the mainstream media? Resonance – is this a longstanding issue with stakeholders? Are the dominant group of stakeholders likely to agree with the issues that are surfaced? Moral high ground – Does the organization have an acceptable response to the issue? Are the dominant stakeholders likely to support this?

Crisis phase

- Embark on media relations efforts online and offline (Pang, 2010).

- When the crisis develops online, Coombs and Holladay (2012) recommended the following three guidelines: One, be where the action is; two, be there before the paracrisis appears; three, be redundant and sprawl (cast a wide net).

Post crisis phase
Even after mainstream media has lost interest in a crisis, conversations do continue online. To ensure offending materials on cyberspace become less easily available to netizens, organizations can generate positive news and web links to counter the once-discriminatory terms on search engine. They can do this by creatively manipulate key search terms to generate positive news reports, blog postings or articles.

Conclusion
This study has examined how crises can be triggered online, how different social media tools escalate crises, and how issues become legitimized when they transit to mainstream media. From the five case studies, we observe that conventional news values still continue to guide news coverage in the mainstream media, such as celebrity factor (Southwest Airlines and Singapore politician), human interest and conflict (Domino's Pizza) policies (Domino's Pizza, Southwest Airlines), novelty (United) and massive customer dissatisfaction (Dell and United). While new media has empowered stakeholders with new tools and platforms to air their grievances, these incidents will transit onto mainstream media only if they are able to fulfill the inherent newsworthiness criteria of the newsroom. If we use the United crisis as an illustration, United would have saved itself much headache and heartache if it had been responsive to Dave Carroll's request in the first place.

The axiom, the best way to manage a crisis is to prevent one, rings ever so true in this era where organizations can be so empowered when embracing technology to reach out to stakeholders, yet can be rendered disempowered when it does not sufficiently harness the very tools available to them.

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Appendix. The cases

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

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

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

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

Singapore politician (2012). In response to an ongoing debate over high ministerial salary in Singapore, Grace Fu, a former corporate chief turned politician, expressed her concerns over salary reduction on her Facebook page and how that might deter talented corporate honchos who would have to give up their huge pay packets to enter politics. Her post became viral and sparked criticism among netizens. Thousands of people reposted the post, creating an Internet meme that began with "When I made the decision to . . ."

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