(DON'T) COME FLY WITH ME: A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF UNITED AIRLINES' 2017 PUBLIC RELATIONS CRISIS FOLLOWING *UNITED EXPRESS FLIGHT 3411*

by

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(Under the Direction of Bryan H. Reber)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis was to understand whether the influence of traditional media hinders an organization in framing their own narrative following a crisis. *United Express Flight 3411* served as a case study. In this episode, a Vietnamese immigrant was violently removed from *Flight 3411* in favor of United Airlines employees. Following the incident, captured on video and shared on social media, United CEO Oscar Munoz gained widespread notoriety for his inconsistent and often ill-considered crisis management strategies.

A qualitative analysis was conducted of United Airlines' internal and external crisis messaging, in addition to the coverage from five major news outlets. It was found that United Airlines was unable to dictate the narrative of this crisis event, and that the news reporting was, in reality, often guided by the public sentiment as witnessed on social media. Consequently, this study provides guidelines and suggestions for both crisis practitioners and scholars.

INDEX WORDS: crisis management, crisis, deal, denial, diminish, image repair theory, situational crisis communication theory, *United Express Flight 3411*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Within a two-week timeframe in April 2017, a major organization, a well-known Republican political commentator, and a senior government official all suffered public relations crises. First, Pepsi unveiled a television advertisement, supported by reality television star Kendall Jenner. The commercial was intended to pay homage to the long history of social protests in the United States. Instead, public perception was that Pepsi trivialized the subject by appropriating it for financial gain. Simultaneously, *The New York Times* published a report revealing almost $13 million had been paid to five women in exchange for their silence following sexual harassment allegations made against Fox News host Bill O'Reilly. As a result, O'Reilly lost his position at Fox.

White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer, in a White House press briefing, then seemed to suggest that Adolf Hitler had not used chemical weapons against his own people during World War Two. Aside from being inaccurate, his comments exacerbated existing anti-Semitic tensions because they came during the Jewish celebration of Passover. This was neither the first nor the last problematic comment from members of the Trump administration, as several others have repeatedly shown a lack of understanding and sensitivity towards issues of race, religion, and history. Public relations experts watched, astonished, as events continued to unfurl.

Amidst these farces, for want of a better word, United Airlines managed to capture both newspaper headlines and public attention.[1] On Sunday, April 9, Dr. David Dao was dragged, bleeding and screaming, from *United Express Flight 3411*. Dr. Dao, a Vietnamese immigrant, was randomly selected to leave an oversold flight from O'Hare International Airport in Chicago. This was to allow airline employees to board the plane. Despite being a paying customer, Dr. Dao's refusal led to his forced removal from the flight by security officers.

This was an avoidable and unnecessary fiasco. Caught on video by other passengers on the flight, the footage quickly went viral as it was shared through social media (*Business Insider*, 2017). Compounding the traumatic footage, medical reports indicated that Dr. Dao would likely require surgery. The episode had left Dao with a concussion and a broken nose, as well as two lost teeth that were knocked out as security personnel removed him. To make matters worse, United Airlines CEO Oscar Munoz initially appeared unapologetic. Following a later, rather feeble, apology tweeted by United Airlines, a letter from Munoz to United staff was leaked on Twitter. In this letter, Munoz defended both the flight crew and company policies that led to this incident. Eventually a third apology, somewhat sincere in tone, was released. Unfortunately, the damage was already done.

[1] United Airlines is a unit of United Continental Holdings Inc. and will hereafter be referred to as either 'United Airlines' or 'United'.

1.1 Purpose of Study

One could soon become overwhelmed by the number of crises facing United Airlines during this timeframe. Just two weeks prior to the events of *Flight 3411*, the organization faced a separate PR trial when two 10-year-old girls were prevented from wearing leggings on a flight. Then, mere weeks after the events on-board *Flight 3411*, the organization faced questions regarding the death of a rare three-foot-long rabbit on a flight from Britain to the United States.

Indeed, United suffered something of an 'annus horribilis' in 2017. Therefore, this study will focus on the events of April 9, 2017, and the immediate aftermath. That comprises a case study of the *United Express Flight 3411* public relations crisis as well as the organization's failures to adequately address the issue.

The overall purpose of this study is to better understand the influence of traditional and (to a lesser extent) social media in shaping an organization's ability to frame their own message following a crisis. It is important to fully comprehend how United's crisis strategy unfolded through the event, following the social media backlash and video release. Moreover, this thesis will inform how this crisis was reported in the media.

1.2 Significance of Study

A crisis is traditionally defined as an unexpected situation or event, which can negatively affect both individuals and organizations. This may take shape through financial or reputational damage, in addition to spoiling stakeholder relations. No two crises are alike,

and crises can occur at any time. The importance of constant vigilance, and planning for various crisis events, cannot be emphasized enough. Risk management, as well as effective and consistent communication internally and externally during and following a crisis, are critical aspects of any successful organization.

From the numerous public relations crises facing organizations today, *Flight 3411* is worthy of detailed study. Making headlines around the world, the event had a substantial impact on social media. As consumers raged against the organization, threatening a boycott, United Airlines received a then-record 1.2 million mentions on Twitter (*ListenFirst*). The organization also acquired approximately 135,000 interactions on Facebook following the incident. These were predominantly negative, with social media users becoming increasingly creative in their criticisms. Countless memes and popular hashtags, such as #NewUnitedAirlinesMottos, generated myriad noteworthy responses (See Appendix A).

United Airlines even attracted the attention of the late-night talk show circuit. Hosts Jimmy Kimmel, Seth Myers and James Cordon roasted the company over successive shows, with figures such as Matt Damon contributing their celebrity to the cause. Southwest Airlines, a key competitor, unwittingly became involved after a fake logo, adapted to show the slogan "We Beat the Competition. Not You." circulated for several days before the organization announced that this was not an official communication.

There is much the public relations community can learn from this episode. In the wake of *Flight 3411,* trade publication *PR Week* gained unwelcome attention for naming Oscar Munoz their 'Communicator of the Year' less than a month prior to his fall from grace. Numerous experts have since weighed in on the event. However, it is evident that this crisis event warrants an academic evaluation. Only through a careful, qualitative approach, can the crisis management tactics taken during *Flight 3411* be truly understood. This lends itself ideally to a thesis: a model case study in how not to perform crisis communications.

CHAPTER 2

CRISIS BACKGROUND

2.1 United Airlines and Competitors

United Continental Holdings, Inc. (UAL), currently valued at approximately $21 billion, is the fourth largest aviation organization in the United States (*Market Watch*, 2018). It is also the largest in terms of destinations served, making United one of the more significant aviation corporations in the American market. Its main competitors are Delta Airlines, Inc., Southwest Airlines Co. and American Airlines Group, Inc. From these, Delta boasts the highest market share, followed by Southwest and American Airlines respectively.

United Airlines runs 4,500 flights a day, connecting with 337 airports across five continents. In 2017, the organization transported more than 148 million passengers on 1.6 million flights. Home to seven U.S. mainland hubs including Chicago O'Hare, Denver, and Houston Intercontinental, United Airlines operates more than 1,000 mainline and regional aircrafts per day.

2.2 Crisis Timeline

Sunday, April 9, 2017

After all passengers are seated on *United Express Flight 3411*, it is announced that four travelers must deplane to accommodate four staff members needed to cover an unstaffed

flight at another airport. An initial offer of $400 in credit toward a future United flight is made, later increased to $800. No passengers volunteer, so four passengers are randomly identified by the check-in desk computer to be removed from the flight.

Three of the selected passengers accept to leave upon being chosen, but Dr. David Dao refuses, arguing that he needs to see patients the next day at his clinic. Members of the Chicago Department of Aviation Security are called by the United staff. Conflict between the two groups results in Dr. Dao suffering injuries to his head and mouth, before being dragged down the aisle.

Video footage of the incident is captured by several passengers, and once posted starts trending on social media. Without hours, the story is picked up by both television and print media outlets.

Monday, April 10, 2017

In a short statement released on Twitter, United Airlines apologizes for the incident, but notably makes no reference to either Dr. Dao or the video footage. The organization is also forced to clarify that the flight was never actually overbooked, as had previously been asserted, but rather had been sold out.

Later the same day, United releases a new statement from CEO Oscar Munoz. The episode is deemed "an upsetting event," and passengers on the plane receive an apology. Again, however, the organization does not speak directly about Dr. Dao's treatment.

On Monday evening, an internal company memo from Mr. Munoz to United employees becomes public. In it, he announces that he stands by them and even appears to blame Dr. Dao for the events that transpired.

Tuesday, April 11, 2017

Facing widespread backlash for their initial remarks, United change tack in another statement from Mr. Munoz. In this news release, Munoz claims the airline now accepts full responsibility for the episode and wishes to make amends to all injured parties.

Wednesday, April 12, 2017

Mr. Munoz appears on ABC's *Good Morning, America*, striking a remorseful tone. Directly addressing the video footage, Munoz claims he was embarrassed when he saw the video of Dr. Dao being dragged from the aircraft. Later that day, United Airlines announces it will offer a full refund to every passenger on the flight.

Thursday, April 13, 2017

Dr. Dao's lawyer and daughter speak at a news conference in Chicago, prompting United Airlines to once again respond. The organization continues to apologize. This latest statement repeats the assertion that Mr. Munoz reached out to Dr. Dao to apologize, a claim refuted by Dao's daughter.

Thursday April 27, 2017

Two weeks later, United Airlines release the promised official review of events. In this 30-page document, United outline their own failures during this crisis and present numerous goals for moving forward (See Appendix B).

2.3 *Flight 3411* on Social Media

Social media monitoring organizations *LexisNexis*, *Brandwatch* and *Crimson Hexagon* all note that, prior to this crisis, United Airlines typically did not receive a noteworthy volume of social media attention. The occasional spike, common to most large businesses, was still nothing untoward.

It is also worth mentioning that, at the time of this crisis, United was attempting to capitalize on a somewhat unusual viral trend – rather oddly, one concerning chicken

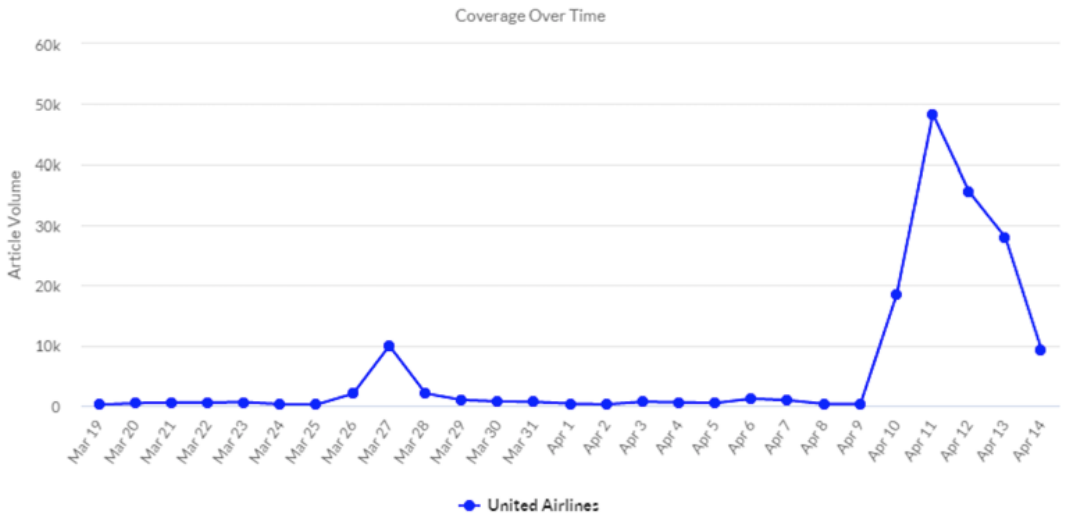

Figure 1: United Airlines active social media coverage before and after *Flight 3411* (Source: LexisNexis).

nuggets – to boost its social media presence.[2] However, once the video footage of Dr. Dao was posted to Twitter this immediately changed. Figure 1 shows how rapidly the story developed from the date of the incident and how extensively it was covered within this short timeframe.

The first tweets mentioning *Flight 3411* surfaced on social media – initially, mostly on Twitter – just after 8 p.m. EST on Sunday, April 9. Figure 2 demonstrates the sharp increase in volume during the initial 48 hours following the incident. It can be seen that, as previously alluded to, United received relatively few tweets in the hours preceding the incident (Bannister, 2017). This is important, for it should have become clear that there was something to be concerned about far sooner than was the case. However, United's

Figure 2: Volume of Twitter mentions concerning United Airlines in the first 48 hours following *Flight 3411* (Source: Brandwatch).

[2] The *United Airlines Flight 3411* crisis went head-to-head on social media with an overwhelmingly positive story that involved their brand – Carter Wilkerson's now famous quest for a year's free supply of Wendy's chicken nuggets. United offered, should Wilkinson achieve his target, to fly him to any US Wendy's location free of charge (Bannister, 2017).

social media team arguably failed to react in a timely manner and this allowed the crisis to gain momentum.

The timing of this incident does impact the relatively subtle thread of discussions that took place on social media. Although 8 p.m. is not typically considered late, it is also not too common for many organizations to continue close monitoring of their accounts at this time. Therefore, United could possibly never have received ample warning of the coming firestorm (Bannister, 2017).

The first clear peak in conversations about United did not occur until 5 a.m. EST on the following day, April 10. Only then did a social listening alert start picking up the increase in conversation, nearly 10 hours later after the initial tweets (Burnside, 2017).

In the hours following the incident, United's social media mentions rose at an alarming rate. Figures 2 and 3 both show that United, in a matter of hours, had become one of the

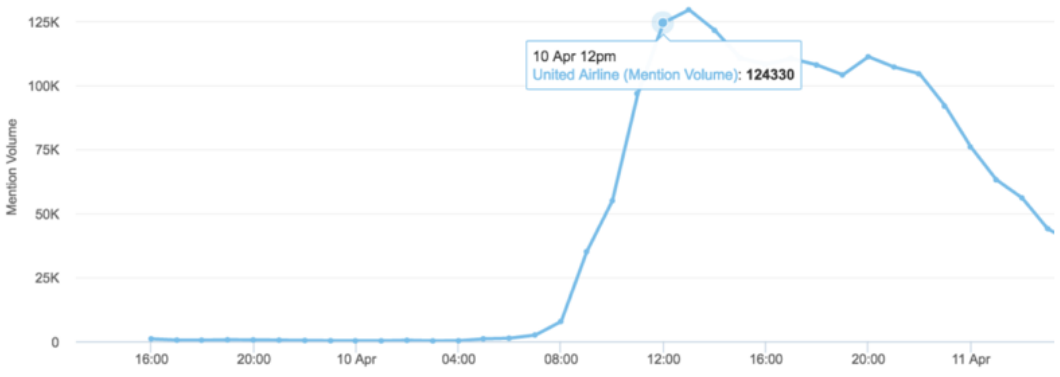

Figure 3: Volume of Twitter mentions concerning United Airlines following initial organization statements (Source: Brandwatch).

most popular trending topics online. Figure 3 also alludes to the impact of CEO Oscar Munoz's comments, for his confused messaging did nothing to placate stakeholders and social media users. At this point, as momentum grew, the kindling of dissatisfaction ignited into a blaze of anger and upset (Bannister, 2017).

Sentiment was, to say the least, negative (see Figure 4). The boycotting of United soon became one of the major developments on social media along with a general feeling of disbelief, bewilderment, and disgust. In fact, excluding neutral content, conversation classified as "disgust" made up 30% of social media posts while "anger" constituted an alarming 34% (Kane, 2017).

Earlier social media posts, even those from unverified accounts with smaller followings, would often receive upwards of 100,000 retweets. As this crisis progressed, however, social media mentions decreased significantly. Yet, it is worth noting that United Airlines

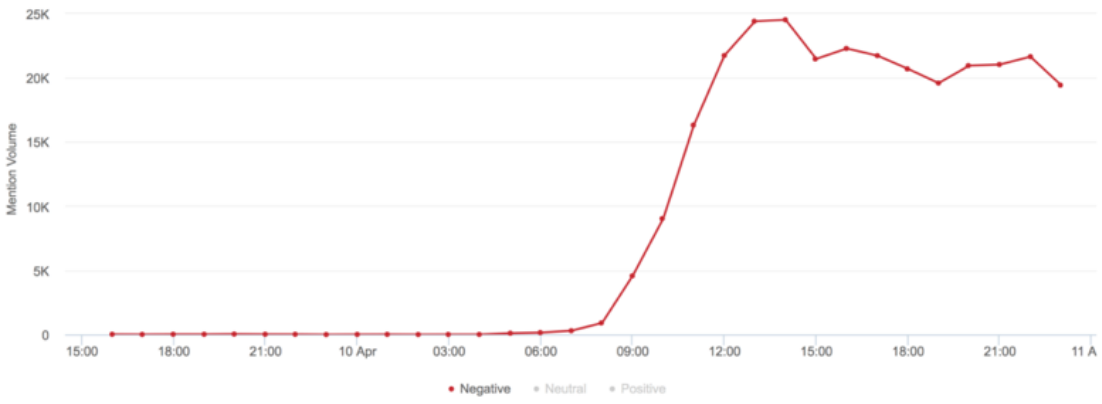

Figure 4: Volume of negative tweets concerning United Airlines in the first 48 hours following *Flight 3411* (Source: Brandwatch).

struggled to move past this event for several months. This is evidenced in the myriad attempted Twitter posts from the organization that were met with responses referencing the supposed 'brutality' of the organization (See Appendix A).

Few would dispute that United handled this situation poorly, and it is clear from the aforementioned information that public sentiment at no point supported the organization. It is important, in planning a comprehensive study of this crisis, to therefore develop a knowledge of the frameworks that crisis communication strategies have been built upon.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Organizational image, reputation, and crisis management are fundamental to this thesis. The varying rhetoric from United Airlines CEO Oscar Munoz and the subsequent news coverage of the crisis will be analyzed with these concepts in mind. Therefore, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 1999, 2007, 2014, 2018) and image repair (Benoit, 1997), as well as framing (Entman, 1993) and stakeholder (Freeman, 1984) theories, will constitute the primary theoretical frameworks for this study.

First, it is important to understand that image is often (if not always) crafted from public impressions of an organization. Further, the image of an organization, in the public relations community, is often rooted in their rhetoric. Post-crisis rhetoric can either reduce or exacerbate reputational damage, making SCCT and image repair important theories to consider when examining post-crisis communication.

W. T. Coombs' (2007) situational crisis communication theory is widely considered among the dominant frameworks in examining the influence of responsibility attribution on organizational reputation. Refined through several iterations across three decades, SCCT proffers a tangible link between reputational threat, organizational responsibility,

and crisis response strategy. In brief, SCCT posits that a higher level of potential crisis responsibility equals a greater negative impact on reputational assets.

A significant recent revision to SCCT suggests that social media ought to be used in tandem with traditional media during crises (Coombs, 2007, 2018). It must be noted that inappropriate channel selection can potentially worsen a crisis, yet this framework advocates using every channel where possible. It is important to incorporate SCCT into social media studies, to better understand and advance this framework.

Another invaluable crisis management framework, image repair states that image and reputation provide figurative and monetary value to an organization (Benoit, 1997). This theory assumes that threats to organizational image are inevitable and that effective rhetoric can do much to help repair any damage. Appropriate words, in conjunction with actions, can affect how stakeholders perceive an organization facing crisis.

It must also be acknowledged that understanding the successful (and the unsuccessful) framing of discourse following a crisis event is critical. Frames have always been essential to the communication process, as well as in the minds of both media creators and consumers. For decades, studies have shown the direct effect of mass media frames on how individuals may understand an issue (Entman, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 2014). Frame development is primarily characterized by how frames are constructed, the relationship between media and audience, and how frames affect different groups. Since

crises can be expected to receive different interpretations, the frame building process often results in a competition of conflicting frames.

In addition to relying on consistent and clear rhetoric, organizations that wish to survive a crisis must maintain positive relationships with their stakeholders. These interested parties can include the media, employees, consumers, competitors, government agencies, and the community at large. An important part of developing a crisis management plan entails identifying stakeholders and cultivating constructive relationships.

Many organizations operate in unstable environments. Therefore, they must constantly assess how best to respond to stakeholders during crises. The increasing reliance of organizations on technology means that social media are more valuable than ever before. Communicators must adapt and evolve, to avoid missing effective methods for reaching stakeholders. Furthermore, it is worth noting that these new technologies require additional attention to ensure they are used appropriately and effectively.

These frameworks, being discourse based and loosely associated, are ideally suited to this thesis. Each provides a structure for textual analyses, by offering various principles for successful communication during a crisis. This foundation will hopefully enable a thorough comprehension of the successes and / or failures of United's rhetoric.

CHAPTER 4

LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 A Brief History of Crisis Communication – Scholarship and Practice

Crises generate a strong public desire for information, placing a subsequent pressure on media outlets to satisfy this. This alone makes crisis communication and management a subject worthy of attention. Before undertaking an examination of any one particular crisis event, however, it is important to first understand the roots and progression of crisis communication research.

Theoretical scholarship in the field of crisis communication emerged somewhat sluggishly in the 1980s (Fishman, 1999; Khodarahmi, 2009; Kim et al., 2004). With initial research focusing predominantly on single case study evidence, it took several years for the field to mature and truly tackle developing analytical constructs (Fishman, 1999).

Considered among the first widely accepted definitions of a crisis, Steven Fink (1986) described "an unstable time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending" (p. 15). Fink's work depicts crises as unfolding in four stages. The initial warning (or *prodromal*) stage must be incorporated in all crisis management plans. Even if a crisis

cannot be prevented at this juncture, a thorough understanding and awareness of the problem will still prove beneficial once a crisis strikes.

The *acute* phase of a crisis is "the point of no return" (Fink, 1986, p. 22). This is when most practitioners consider a situation a crisis, and the limitation of damages is crucial. The *chronic* stage should be considered the post-mortem of the crisis and is an opportunity for reflection and self-analysis (Fink, 1986; Fishman, 1999). Finally, *crisis resolution* is the period when an organization strives to make a full recovery (Fink, 1986, p. 25). This work is by no means perfect, but it does offer a comprehensive and cyclical characterization of a crisis event (Fishman, 1999).

Positing that any crisis can seriously challenge the reputation of an organization, Mitroff (1994) proposed a more prescriptive model. His resulting *Total Crisis Framework* incorporates types, phases, systems, and stakeholders (Mitroff, 1994). *Type* refers to the varying crises that can occur, as "virtually no crisis ever happens in isolation" (p. 105). *Phases* reveals how crises unfold, discussing the "identifiable mechanisms" such as signal detection, probing, prevention, damage containment, recovery, and learning (p. 107). The scope of an organization is explained through s*ystems*, as a chain reaction can occur during a crisis and can undermine response efforts to the initial problem. Finally, a failure to understand the complex network of *stakeholders* can severely exacerbate a crisis (Freeman, 1984; Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

In an effort to incorporate, advance, and organize the various preceding insights into the crisis management process, W. Timothy Coombs (1999) offered his own framework. Each of his three macro stages – pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis – contain micro elements within. For example, the pre-crisis stage can be broken into *signal detection*, *prevention,* and *preparation*. Notably, the works of both Fink (1986) and Mitroff (1994) can be incorporated into this three-staged model. Working methodically, moving from *signal detection* to *post crisis concerns*, Coombs (1999) repeatedly stresses that the development and continual maintenance of a crisis management plan (CMP) is essential for all organizations. Further, crisis events can have ripple effects beyond the immediate remit of the organization itself that must be anticipated (Coombs, 1999; Fink, 1994; Nistor & Beuran, 2015).

Taking these seminal texts into account, one must also acknowledge the influence of culture when defining crisis management (Khodarahmi, 2009). While there is "a right and a wrong way of coping with a crisis," it is important to appreciate the myriad influences that must also be accounted for (Khodarahmi, 2009, p. 523). Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer (1998) argue that crisis is a natural phase of organizational development, and that crisis-prepared organizations do not design anything in isolation. It may be a bleak view to take, but in these uncertain times it is foolish *not* to anticipate a crisis. Organizations must shift their thinking from 'if' something will happen, to 'when' it will (Fink, 1994; Nistor & Beuran, 2015; Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 1998).

In support of this, Claeys and Opgenhaffen (2016) noted that crisis communication theories have become increasingly important to the practice of public relations. Recent years have witnessed a number of new audience-oriented theories, concerning effective communication protocols for use during organizational crises (Fraustino & Liu, 2018; Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). However, much of this emerging research is all but ignored by those organizations scholars seek to influence.

Indeed, several meta-studies have considered the extent to which theory is applied in practice during crises (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016; Kim et al., 2014). Despite best efforts, crisis practitioners report theories as abstract, inaccessible and often irrelevant. Experience and gut instincts are too often preferred over keeping up with academic research (Kim et al., 2014). Therefore, scholars and researchers are left questioning how they should make relevant knowledge available to practitioners.

Some argue that research findings could simply be published in business journals, as well as public relations and /or communication journals (Kim et al., 2014). Similarly, crisis specialists could seek more guidance from scholars. Suggestions include conference invitations, or the development of seminars and workshops, to help practitioners better understand crisis theory, thereby making it more applicable to their own work.

Regrettably, crisis literature is both continually expanding and often contradictory. This concern threatens to limit its value to crisis communicators. However, in his recent appraisals of the field, Coombs (2014, 2018) has identified three consistent findings that

should serve as base-level knowledge for all crisis managers. Being the first to report a crisis is, of course, beneficial, as is appropriately highlighting the victim in any public messages. Further, perhaps now more than ever, the need to fight inaccurate information is paramount.

4.2 Situational Crisis Communications Theory

Building on attribution theory, W. T. Coombs (1999, 2007, 2014, 2018) developed the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) as an explanation for how organizations select crisis response strategies. Per attribution theory, stakeholders will seek to identify causes, or make 'attributions', following negative and / or unforeseen events. It is worth noting that SCCT is designed for organizational crises and is not a generic theory of crisis communication.

In its first iteration, SCCT classified crises into 'types' according to attribution theory parameters (Coombs, 1995). Four general categories were designed around the two variables of intentionality and controllability. These were, in turn, accompanied by three context-based variables: evidence veracity, reputational damage, and performance history (Coombs, 1995, pp. 455-457).

Although crisis management scholarship has since moved on, these early ideas unquestionably remain relevant. Coombs' 1995 framework facilitates a clear matching process between each form of crisis, and the appropriate crisis response strategy.

Arguably, it was this work that paved the way for increasingly comprehensive revisions to be made through the years.

One such review re-evaluated crisis types into three clusters: *victim*, *accidental*, and *preventable* (Coombs, 2007). Where an organization is perceived as the victim of a crisis and the attribution is seen as weak, there is but a mild reputational threat. When the crisis can be considered an accident and the attribution is minimal, there is a moderate reputational threat. Finally, when a crisis is deemed preventable and the attribution is strong, organizations face a severe reputational threat (Coombs, 2007, 2018). This 'refined' version of SCCT consolidates the notion that there is a tangible link between reputational threat, organizational responsibility, and crisis response strategy. The higher the potential crisis responsibility, the greater the negative impact on the reputational assets (Coombs, 2007). In turn, crisis response strategies must shift accordingly (see Table 1).

Denial, both naïve and sophisticated, should only be used if there is a low level of attribution (i.e., when the organization can themselves be seen as a victim). *Diminish* strategies should primarily be used when attribution is minimal (i.e. when the organization did not have crisis intentions). *Deal* response options ought to be used when both attribution is strong, and the crisis event was thought to be preventable. In this instance, the threat to reputation is severe (Coombs, 2006, 2007, 2018).

Table 1. Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Phase 1		Phase 2 Crisis Response Strategies	
Crisis Cluster	Examples		
Victim - Weak attributions of crisis responsibility. - Mild reputational threat.	– Natural disasters – Rumors – Workplace violence – Product tampering	*Deny*	Naïve - Denial Sophisticated - Attack / Accuse - Scapegoat
Accidental - Minimal attributions of crisis responsibility. - Moderate reputational threat.	– Challenges – Technical-error accidents – Recalls	*Diminish*	– Excuses - Intention denial - Agency denial – Justification
Preventable - Strong attributions of crisis responsibility. - Severe reputational threat.	– Organization misdeed – Human-error accidents – Management misconduct	*Deal*	– Compensation – Compassion – Apology – Bolstering – Ingratiation

(Coombs, 2006, 2007)

Following the 2007 developments, the SCCT framework remained mostly untouched for almost a decade. However, the rapid growth of social media has forced scholars to reconsider its validity. Coombs argues that in recent years there has been a sharp increase in organizational and reputational crises. This, he asserts, can be directly linked to the rise in social media use (Coombs, 2018; Sohn & Lariscy, 2014).

Social media has arguably become a key driving force in the field of crisis communication (Coombs, 2018; Jiang & Luo, 2018). As a result, researchers and practitioners wrestle with what has been called social media crises. This notion can best be described as a situation in which social media either causes or intensifies a crisis event (Coombs, 2018). Unfortunately, this is rather vague and numerous scholars have found flaws in its applicability (Coombs, 2018; Jiang & Luo, 2018).

Coombs (2018) has noted that social media crises are essentially risks that an organization is managing in public view. The first major shift to the situational crisis communication framework, as a result of social media, is the increased visibility of the pre-crisis phase. Coombs (2018) noted that this includes preparation and training, and that external stakeholders would not have historically seen this. This is now when a crisis transforms into a 'paracrisis' – managed and witnessed almost entirely in the public sphere.

Further, since its inception, SCCT has "assumed that crisis managers would use traditional media coverage" (Coombs, 2018, p. 33). Social media has put an end to

relying solely on such resources. Although inappropriate channel selection can worsen a crisis, Coombs (2018) advocated using every channel if possible. Of course, other considerations must be taken into account and each platform offers a different opportunity and has a unique effect on audiences (North et al., 2018).

Social media allows activists to control how, when, and where their message is seen (Coombs, 2014, 2018). As a result, organizations must be equally visible. So, following this exploration of the evolution of SCCT, one must consequently question its value to the world of public relations.

Ma and Zhan (2016) identified SCCT as the dominant framework in examining the effect of responsibility attribution on organizational reputation. However, studies using this framework have generated mixed results. Similarly, there is no conclusive evidence linking SCCT-identified response strategies and organizational reputation (Ma & Zhan, 2016). Scholars have suggested reasons for these inconsistencies, but they often lack notable empirical evidence (Kim et al., 2014).

Further, predictions from the situational crisis communication theory response framework have been shown to work when applied to brief, contained, crisis events. However, for longer crises there is a "complex web of intertextual and situational context" that is not sufficiently accounted for (Bamber & Parry, 2016, p. 348).

Additional concerns have been raised through the years. Some argue that the role of local cultures is not sufficiently addressed. Others contest that scholars such as Coombs are simply fighting a losing battle, believing that there is no best way to organize a corporation. In addition, studies from Sisco, Collins, & Zoch (2010) and Claeys and Opgenhaffen (2016) have found that, in practice, organizations only used strategies recommended by SCCT approximately one-third of the time. As noted previously, this is a challenge that all crisis scholars must address.

In their consideration of SCCT, Ma and Zhan (2016) conducted a meta-analysis, comprising "original research from January 1990 to March 2015" (p. 105). The results provide empirical support for two key propositions of SCCT: "that attributed responsibility was negatively and strongly associated with organizational reputation, and that SCCT-identified response strategies were positively but weakly associated with organizational reputation" (p.116). Kim et al. (2014) even found that denial was oft used in practice, despite SCCT denouncing it as the least effective strategy with regard to the outcome of many crisis situations.

Despite many positive strides, situational crisis communication theory still faces myriad obstacles. Foremost among these is the continued evolution of social media platforms, and their ramifications regarding difficulty in predicting stakeholders following a crisis. However, another threat can be seen in the development of new crisis management models, including the social-mediated crisis communication model (SMCC) (Austin &

Jin, 2018). SCCT must continue to evolve, or it may face extinction in these social-mediated times.

4.3 Image Repair Theory

With roots embedded in the rhetorical field, most notably *apologia*, William Benoit (1997) developed a theory of image restoration to understand how organizations recover from crises. This framework suggests that organizational reputation is of such value that "those accused of wrongdoing are motivated to [seek] repair" wherever possible (Len-Ríos & Benoit, 2004, p. 96). As a result, image repair assumes the majority of communication to be goal-driven.

Many argue that crisis communication theories have evolved beyond the reactive approaches of Benoit and Coombs (Martin & Boynton, 2005). Proactive measures must certainly be encouraged; however, there are occasions where the prodromal / pre-crisis phase is not as prevalent. In those moments, reactive theories come to the fore. Benoit's theory has been documented in the crisis strategies of politicians, corporations, athletes, and celebrities (Glantz & Benoit, 2018).

To understand image repair strategies, one must "consider the nature of attacks or complaints that … instigate a corporate crisis" (Benoit, 1997, p. 178). According to Benoit (1997), an attack has two components: the accused is held responsible for an action, and that act is considered offensive. Benoit also acknowledges the multiple stakeholders that accused organizations may confront. Indeed, organizations must

recognize the need to prepare responses for various audiences. There is inevitably some overlap, but stakeholders frequently have different "interests, concerns, and goals" (p. 178).

Image repair theory also proposes the various message options facing an organization during a crisis. Essentially, this refers to what a corporation can say when facing a crisis. Benoit (1997) organizes these strategies into five distinct categories: *denial*, *evasion of responsibility*, *reducing offensiveness of event*, *corrective action*, and *mortification*. Some of these are further subdivided into variants (Bamber & Parry, 2016; Benoit, 1997).

Overall, Benoit's catalog of image restoration actions consists of fourteen strategies and tactics. These are seldom used in isolation. Coombs and Schmidt (2000) note the examples of bolstering, shifting blame and corrective action. When combined, these tactics indicate that separation from the crisis is the optimal image repair strategy. The strength of this theory, therefore, is in the details that it provides, and adaptability of the model to cover virtually every attack-defend situation.

Since its development, Benoit has noted the successful application of his work to several real-world case studies. This includes the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska, and Union Carbide's response to the Bhopal gas leak. However, its relevance has continued into the twenty-first century. Fishman (1999) reports the image repair strategy of evading responsibility being extensively used by ValuJet CEO Lewis Jordan, following the 1996

Valujet Flight 592 crash. Time and again, Fishman highlights occasions where Jordan pushed blame onto another party (primarily SabreTech).

In recent years, Kim et al. (2009) note the prevalence of image repair theory in crisis communications research. However, they comment that best practices, per image repair theory, are often not widely employed by crisis communication practitioners (Kim, Johnson, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009). This disparity is not unique to image repair, as previously mentioned.

Aggergaard (2015) provides several interesting comparisons between public relations crisis response strategies and those used by lawyers and legal teams. Included is the success of public relations practitioners in persuading lawyers that "no comment" is often a poor crisis response strategy (p. 24). While outright denial is arguably an important factor in a courtroom success, crafting appropriate media comments can better influence client relations and build an increasingly positive organizational reputation.

Traditionally, crisis communication scholarship has identified denial as a poor opportunity for organizational image restoration. This approach rarely aids organizations in transitioning from accused to accuser, and potentially taking the moral high ground to repair stakeholder relations and rebuild institutional morale (North et al., 2018). Yet, lamentably, this advice is too often ignored.

As with situational crisis communication theory, social media has impacted our understanding of image repair. Only in recent years have social media platforms received noteworthy scholarly attention. In their appraisal of image repair discourse and social media, Benoit and Glantz (2018) commented that tweets, retweets, and replies are the three primary strategies one can use on Twitter. Considering a variety of case studies, it can be concluded that social media have advantages and disadvantages when facing crisis events. Efficiency and directness can aide organizations, whereas brevity and ambiguity can present a concern for some.

4.4 Framing Theory

Framing theory has, in recent years, usurped both agenda-setting theory and cultivation theory as the most commonly applied theoretical lens in mass communication research (Bryant & Miron, 2004; Van Gorp, 2007). Frames can be understood and witnessed within several elements of the communication process, as well as in the minds of both media creators and consumers (Entman, 1993). They are also created in both media content and within local cultures (Van Gorp, 2007). Somewhat confusingly, it must be admitted, frames are often described as being everywhere … yet no one knows either where exactly they begin or where they end (Bryant & Miron, 2004; Kendall, 2005; Van Gorp, 2007).

Entman's original (1993) definition of framing is built around notions of selection and salience. Unfortunately, these ideas have long been misunderstood and thus employed inappropriately. Cacciatore, Scheufele and Iyengar (2016) commented that this has

allowed researchers to simply incorporate additional media effects models under the framing label (pp. 11–12). To that end – frames, put simply, "highlight some bits of information about an item that is the subject of a communication, thereby elevating them in salience" (Entman, 1993, p. 53).

The relationship between media frames and public opinion has long received noteworthy scholarly attention. For decades, studies have shown the direct effect of mass media frames on how individuals may understand an issue (Entman, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972, 2014). Frame development is primarily characterized by how frames are constructed, the correlations between media and audience, and how frames affect different groups (de Vreese, 2005). Since crises can be expected to receive different interpretations, the frame building process often results in a competition of conflicting frames (Van Gorp, 2007).

Framing operates through cognitive, rhetorical, and ideological processes. In cognitive processing, ideas and facts beneficial to a central theme are included, while those deemed to be negative are excluded. Rhetoric suggests how a frame could be interpreted through similes, metaphors, descriptions, and illustrations (Cacciatore, Scheufele & Iyengar, 2016). Ideologically, frames contain information on how a society works – or rather, should work – as well as the relationship among its members. In short, frames provide fundamental assumptions concerning society (Kendall, 2005).

The frame-building processes during a crisis can be considered fundamental to the establishment of organizational reputations. Such events, as previously mentioned, are characterized by low probability of occurrence, high organizational and individual consequences, as well as a degree of unpredictability. Each of these plays a significant role in organizational reputation and performance (An & Gower, 2009; Coombs, 2007; Waller & Conaway, 2011).

The somewhat abstract nature of framing implies that quantitative research methods ought to be combined with more interpretative qualitative methods (Van Gorp, 2007). Current literature has identified a handful of frames that are commonly used in U.S. crisis news coverage: attribution of responsibility, economic impact, conflict, human interest, and morality (An & Gower, 2009). This provides practical insights for crisis communicators and researchers alike. In addition to informing on those news frames media outlets are likely to utilize following a crisis, this information also aids predictions concerning the level of responsibility the media are likely to assign. Organizations can, as noted above, use this to more effectively design their crisis management strategies.

4.5 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory, based on the concepts of Ed Freeman (1984), identifies relevant stakeholders and formulates best practices for acknowledging these distinct audiences. Freeman (1984) defines stakeholders as "any group or individual who is affected by or can impact the achievement of an organization's objectives" (p. 5). This framework suggests that for an organization to be successful, it must look beyond financial

stakeholders and expand its view of critical relationships. If an organization neglects a stakeholder group, even one perceived as less important, that action can have significant negative consequences (Freeman et al., 2010).

The term ‘stakeholder’ has previously been confined to those who contribute to the financial bottom line of the organization. However, a more accurate definition includes all groups with interests in an organization, regardless of the organization’s interest in them (Post, Preston, & Sachs, 2002). Martin and Boynton (2005) argued that establishing strong stakeholder relationships may not help an organization avert every crisis but could play an important role in how the organization resolves a crisis it cannot avoid.

In much of the existing public relations literature, little effort has been made to identify specific stakeholders according to their relationship with the organization. Perhaps the best effort to date in identifying all stakeholder groups comes from Grunig and Hunt (1984), who present four ‘linkages’ to identify stakeholder relationships to an organization (p. 141).

Building on this, with a continued focus on public relations, stakeholder theory outlines five criteria for successful crisis communications with stakeholders through traditional media channels. If adhered to, these strategies may decrease the likelihood of negative stakeholder interactions: “(1) prompt response, (2) truth / avoidance of absolutes, (3) constant flow of information, (4) concern for victims and their families, (5) choice of appropriate spokesperson(s)” (Martin and Boynton, 2005, p. 254).

Martin and Boynton (2005) then use this definition of stakeholder theory to develop several lessons, or guidelines, for crisis communicators. First, it is important to understand that even a minor crisis can influence the media portrayal of an organization. Moreover, it is critical for organizations to learn from past communication mistakes. It is also important to communicate regularly with stakeholders and the media. Equally important, an organization should not perceive the media as its enemy. In many cases, working in tandem is arguably a more effective way of successfully communicating with stakeholders following a crisis (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000).

Stakeholder theory was built, at least in part, on notions of organizational ethics and morality. Crisis communication literature has therefore found this framework particularly useful in defending the basic premise that organizations ought to benefit society (Harrison, Freeman, & de Abreu, 2015). However, social media has once again manipulated the commonly accepted definitions of this sphere. This does not discount earlier work, of course, but one must now accept that working closely with the media may no longer be sufficient. Noting the growing trend of communicating directly with publics through social media, Coombs (2018) warns that an organization could conceivably "create its own paracrisis" by misusing said channels and accidentally offending stakeholders (p. 7). Indeed, stakeholders are the most common source for paracrises. Three stakeholder paracrises have thus been identified: "customer service, venting, and challenge" (Coombs, 2018, p. 7).

Customer service concerns a consumer making public a service problem they have encountered. Venting is when stakeholders, again usually customers, are angry and wish to damage the organization. Challenge is the most complicated of the three and is subsequently the most difficult to assess and respond to. A challenge paracrisis occurs when a group of stakeholders publicly claim that current organizational practices are ethically irresponsible (Coombs, 2014, pp. 8–9).

In 2014, for example, American Apparel posted a celebratory image of fireworks across their social media platforms for Independence Day. However, the image was in fact that of the 1986 *Challenger* space shuttle explosion. Myriad angry posts followed, from a variety of stakeholders, concerning the insensitivity of American Apparel in posting the image. From even the best of intentions, paracrisis episodes can arise. A few months earlier, the New York City Police Department called for the public to tweet images of officers interacting with the community. The proposed hashtag, *#myNYPD*, was soon "hijacked" as citizens sought to "highlight instances of police brutality, abuse, and racial profiling" (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015, p. 932). Following these social media faux pas, neither born of malevolence, both organizations were forced to take immediate corrective action to placate their respective stakeholders.

4.6 Crisis Communication and Social Media

During a crisis, media coverage fundamentally differs from that of an average news day (Bamber & Parry, 2016). The same can be said of social media, as well as other user-generated content. Following the launch of platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and

Twitter, social media have altered the landscape of crisis communication (Fraustino & Liu, 2018).

It is for this (admittedly rather obvious) reason that the intersection between social media and crisis management must be examined. Focusing primarily on Twitter and Facebook, Aggergaard (2015) contended that these relatively new communication methods must be treated with caution. For example, due to "Twitter's 140-character limit … context can be lost" (p. 25). Even with the lengthier content allowed on Facebook, online posts should typically be avoided in the initial stages of a crisis.

Any uncertainty or ambiguity surrounding a response strategy can escalate the problem. Citing a 2013 Pew Research study, Aggergaard (2015) suggested a "comment that the matter is being investigated might suffice" on social media, before addressing the crisis more thoroughly through other communication channels (p. 25).

Bratu (2016), disagreeing with this assessment, addressed the developing, increasingly valuable, function of social media in crisis communication. Social networks, such as Twitter and Facebook, accelerate the distribution of information during crises. It is worth noting that this occurs through both established and unofficial routes. The influx of social media satiates the public demand for personal and direct communication from organization hierarchies, in addition to the need for information regarding their own safety and prosperity as crises unfold.

Drawing on numerous studies, Bratu (2015) also identified the importance of replying to audiences in a timely manner during a crisis. This can prevent online gossip and help to defend organizational reputations. Social media dialogue, when handled successfully by crisis communicators, can protect an organization due to the capacity of social media to rapidly influence public assessments of specific events. However, if not dealt with effectively and efficiently, social media can, ironically, do more harm than good.

In 2016, Eriksson and Olsson presented a comparative study on the perceptions of both crisis professionals and citizens regarding the efficacy of Facebook and Twitter. The authors identified these social media as the "two most important mainstream social media platforms" (Eriksson and Olsson, 2016, p. 199). Examining and analyzing stereotypical uses of social media for these stakeholders, it is suggested that "social media is not a homogenous phenomenon with one coherent role in crisis management and communication research and practice" (p. 205).

North et al. (2018) note that while Twitter is the most widely used platform adopted during a crisis, many Fortune 500 companies still "favor top-down approaches over dialogue" (p. 205). Companies, they argue, tweet messages that stakeholders can see in much the same way historically used to communicate via mail and e-mail (North et al., 2018). Contradicting the majority of prior research, this paper concludes that denial strategies actually receive less negative attention than either diminish or rebuild (North et al., 2018).

Van Zoonen and van der Meer (2015) consider the connections between crisis communication and social media, most notably Twitter. Using an experimental research method, they examine the role of source, as well as content credibility, through which crisis communications are received. Twitter, again, was reported the predominant social media communication application. Citing the "open-by-default, private-by-effort" nature of this platform, the authors explain that Twitter is "omnipresent in organization-public communication" (van Zoonen and van der Meer, 2015, p. 377)

Interestingly, in contrast with much of the current literature, both public relations professionals and citizens appear to prefer Facebook. As a primary social media platform, it is perceived as being more useful as a tool for crisis communication efforts. Further, Twitter is evidently considered by both groups as a "smaller 'elite forum'" that is only now gaining traction in the realm of crisis communication (van Zoonen and van der Meer, 2015, p. 205). While undoubtedly a useful contribution to the subject, it is worth questioning whether these results would differ following the recent alterations made by Twitter to its primary communication policies.

Tække (2017) argues that crisis communication has, in recent years, enjoyed a surge in academic research. However, he argues that the field "still seems to be lacking a solid sociological foundation" (Tække, 2017, p. 183). Therefore, examining crises between organizations and their surrounding social sphere could explain the necessity for organizations to adapt to their environment and perhaps learn lessons to enrich both the organization and their publics.

Towards the conclusion of his article, Tække (2017) moves on to focus on crisis communication. A discussion of Coombs' 'paracrisis' – the threat of a publicly-managed, online, crisis – provides a neat segue into recognizing the developing role of social media when dealing with crises. Social media offers increased knowledge concerning the needs and wants of customers, users and stakeholders. Moreover, monitoring these channels can gauge public opinion, aiding the company in keeping up with market trends and preventing future crises.

Research clearly supports the assertion that social media are highly important in crisis management. Moreover, the literature suggests that employees, as a key online source of information, have the influence to create favorable effects on organizational reputation. Finally, the widely-condemned strategy of denial was interestingly found to be less offensive when communicated by employees, compared to the organization (Tække, 2017).

Overall, the rapid progress of social media is hard to keep up with for both practitioners and scholars alike. Twitter's 140-character-limit was until recently bemoaned by many as a primary concern when responding to crises, yet even the most current research can become outdated overnight. Twitter's November 2017 announcement of a new 280-character-limit serves as an excellent example of the difficulties of working with and studying social media.

4.7 Related Organizational Case Studies

In addition to addressing the interplay between crisis management and social media, one must also recognize the facet of crisis research recently dubbed ‘Corporate Applications’ (Austin & Jin, 2018). For this thesis, it is particularly useful that there be an additional emphasis on the aviation industry. In recent years, countless airlines have faced a mounting number of crises. This is often levelled at organizations such as United, but airports and manufacturers also frequently must handle similar issues.

Following a comprehensive analysis of the wide-ranging discussions within crisis research, Fishman (1999) offered an appraisal of “the crisis communication situation surrounding the Valujet Flight 592 crash” (p. 365). Applying the works of Fink and Benoit, amongst others, the author notes the many different starting points “from which to conduct studies in crisis communication” (p. 365). He concludes that this is an evolving discipline, amongst the fastest growing in the public relations field, and notes that one must maintain a comprehensive understanding of current research. Fishman (1999) believes the developing and diversifying scholarship is encouraging and urges practitioners to regularly engage in discourse with crisis communication scholars. Almost two decades later, his words continue to ring true.

Cowden and Sellnow (2002) analyzed Northwest Airline's use of image restoration strategies during and after their 1998 pilots' strike. Their research concluded that timely and well-executed crisis strategies enabled the organization to be proactive in their attempt to reduce liability for the strike. Campaigns, they posited, can incorporate several

image restoration strategies. These can serve as part of an organization's crisis management plan, providing essential information to internal and external stakeholders alike (Cowden & Sellnow, 2002).

The 2014 Malaysia Airlines incident, a more recent crisis case study, is also valuable when considering crises within the airline industry. Few episodes in this field have captivated both the public and media quite as much. Zhang et al. (2018) note the widespread criticism levelled at this organization following their failure to respond promptly and appropriately to the news of the missing flight MH370. This research identified the profound influence of news frames in evoking stakeholder reactions, and they conclude that organizations would be wise to pay greater attention to "credible news sources" when developing crisis strategies (Zhang et al., 2018, p. 220).

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, provided some of the more severe challenges to have ever faced crisis communicators within the airline industry (Downing, 2007; Greer & Moreland, 2003; Massey, 2005). American Airlines and United Airlines both received scholarly attention following this well-known tragedy. The internet enabled these organizations to provide immediate responses to the attacks. Research indicates, however, that social media (also referred to as Web 2.0) would allow organizations facing a similar crisis today to provide a higher frequency of updates and communicate their crisis response process to their various publics more efficiently and effectively (Downing, 2007; Massey, 2005).

Beyond aviation, it is also worth highlighting some recent organizational crises that received significant global media coverage. Bamber and Parry (2016) examine the crisis response strategy of denial and evaluate it within the context of the 2010 British Petroleum *Deepwater Horizon* incident. Unlike the other organizations involved, namely Transocean and Halliburton, Bamber and Parry (2016) conclude that denial was not the foremost response used by BP. Rather, the organization adopted a hybrid strategy of denial and crisis acceptance. This strategy developed as BP's management did not deny responsibility, for this option was not available to them, yet they resisted fully accepting the blame. Rather, the organization sought to distance itself from the incident as much as possible, as well as implicate the other organizations.

BP was one of the first organizations to use a hybrid denial strategy in a major crisis, but it is likely this will not remain an isolated incident. Therefore, Bamber and Parry (2016) suggested that future researchers reconsider denial and its value as a response strategy. It is important to consider denial in terms of "context and intention (i.e. blame shifting and blame sharing) rather than type (i.e., naive and sophisticated)" (p. 361). Whether this will be reflected in future versions of either image repair or SCCT, of course, remains to be seen.

Martin and Boynton (2005) consider the 1986 *Challenger* and 2003 *Columbia* NASA tragedies. They note the contrasting assessments of NASA's communication efforts in the immediate aftermath of each event and seek to better understand this disparity. Results revealed a greater number of frames denoting successful communications in the articles

concerning the *Columbia*. Consequently, NASA received notably more positive coverage in the four analyzed newspapers – the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and the *Los Angeles Times* – following the *Columbia* disaster than the *Challenger* explosion (p. 258). This study provides additional support for the argument that crisis research can benefit organizations, if adhered to.

Many of the studies mentioned in this review, as well as countless others, conclude their work in similar ways: namely, by identifying key lessons that can be applied to various organizational crises. First, crisis communication affects the media portrayal of an organization. It is also critical for organizations to learn from past mistakes, and regularly seek counsel from crisis scholars. Equally important, organizations must communicate with both stakeholders and the media, and not believe the media to be the enemy. In many cases, even with the increasing influence of social media, working with the media is arguably the most effective way of successfully communicating with stakeholders. That being said, developing a thorough understanding of social media is now essential for all crisis managers.

Based on the preceding literature review and theoretical frameworks being adopted, the following research questions have been developed:

RQ 1	What crisis response strategies did United Airlines employ immediately following this event?
H1	Based on SCCT and image repair theory, United Airlines will seek to employ a *diminish* response strategy but may be forced into a *deal* response strategy.
RQ 2	Did the organizational crisis response strategy vary internally and externally? If so, how? Further, did their response strategy develop over time?
H2	The crisis response strategies used will neither vary internally and externally, nor will they develop over time.
RQ 3.1	Did news framing of this event mirror United Airlines' own message framing?
RQ 3.2	Did news portrayals change over time? If so, how?
H3	News framing of this event will not mirror United Airline's own messaging but will change over time to reflect public sentiment on social media.
RQ 4	Does the influence of traditional media hinder an organization's ability to frame its own messages following a crisis?
H4	The influence of traditional media will hinder an organization's ability to frame its own messages following a crisis.

CHAPTER 5

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research design used in this study, as well as the data collection and analysis procedures deemed most suitable for addressing the aforementioned research questions and hypotheses. As previously stated, the overall purpose of this thesis is to better understand the influence of the media in shaping an organization's ability to frame their own messages following a crisis. Not only will practical methods be presented, but their theoretical foundations will also be discussed.

5.1 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is, by its very nature, interpretative. This methodology requires detailed observation and explanation, and the development of an intimate relationship between researcher and data. This approach acknowledges that one cannot know which element of data is important to the elimination of others. Qualitative researchers study the whole, evaluating information in its entirety and complexity. This approach strives to ensure that conclusions take account of the myriad factors that could potentially impact data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). A qualitative approach is suitable for many studies, but especially those where anticipatory reduction of available data might limit potential findings (Brennen, 2013). Such methods, in short, seek alternate ways of considering existing data.

5.2 Textual Analysis

Textual analysis does not provide results in terms of numbers, nor does it generate statistical analysis that another scholar could easily recreate (McKee, 2003). Without such characteristics, those researchers who rely solely on quantitative, social-scientific methods have often criticized the methodology for being 'unscientific' (Bourgeault, 2012). Although qualitative research may not have the usual hallmarks of a traditional scientific mode of discovery, that does not mean it is less truthful, objective, or accurate. Rather than numeric findings, textual analysis offers interpretations based on cultural and social contexts that quantitative results cannot.

At a rudimentary level, this post-structuralist research approach uses interpretation with the acknowledgement that all cultures experience and understand the world in different ways. The method therefore suggests that texts can have a variety of likely interpretations based on different cultural contexts, rather than focusing on interpretations as simply right or wrong (McKee, 2003).

Reading, listening to, and watching material several times, beginning with a 'preliminary soak', is unquestionably mind-opening. Layers must be peeled back to uncover new meanings. It is important, one could certainly posit, to include this methodology in various studies and move away from a total reliance on quantitative methods.

For this thesis, comprehensive textual analyses were conducted to examine both the public and private rhetoric released by United Airlines and its CEO Oscar Munoz.

Through close reading and analysis, it was possible to go beyond surface meanings and glean more complex understandings of these texts (Brennen, 2013). When preparing a study such as this, it is important to carefully select texts for analysis. Inappropriate choices may negatively impact the overall findings of a study.

First, the rhetoric used in United Airlines' various communications were studied and analyzed. This was accompanied by a close examination of the print news coverage of the crisis as it unfolded. Finally, the official review conducted by United Airlines, as well as the reporting of this and the aftermath of the event was reviewed.

The textual analysis for this study unfolded through multiple levels. First, an initial reading of the texts was executed to ascertain a deeper comprehension of the materials. This was important for further evaluations because it enabled an understanding of the tone of each piece, essential in evaluating the presence of sincerity, the seriousness of critiques, the possibility of sarcasm, and (potentially) the intended offensiveness in some cases.

The next stage of evaluation continued to build upon the previous readings by providing a review of any themes identified and an overall analysis of the texts both individually and as a whole. This also provided an insight of how the texts fit into the overarching theme of crisis management measured against public sentiment.

It was necessary to construct the 'coding' process, as it were, around both the identified data and the literature review. It was here where the theoretical crisis frameworks could best be understood. From this vantage point, therefore, it was possible to develop a comprehensive matrix for the study and begin analyzing the identified data.

5.3 Data Selection and Collection

United Airlines, often through CEO Oscar Munoz, released several messages during this crisis. One of these in particular was meant solely for United employees. Of course, thanks to social media and people's demand for corporate transparency, this instantly became leaked to all. It was vital for all rhetoric to be analyzed, whether on social media platforms or television interviews. In addition to the responses from United Airlines, the media coverage of this event was studied.

This project used purposeful sampling, in that an informed decision was made concerning the material most relevant for analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Articles were drawn from five 'traditional' print news sources: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times*. These are among the largest print outlets in the United States, all with stellar reputations, and cover a significant geographical area of the nation. Articles were downloaded from the respective websites, following numerous keyword searches. These included "United Airlines Flight 3411," "Dr. David Dao," "David Dao," "United Dragging Incident," "United Airlines CEO" and "Oscar Munoz."

The news coverage was selected from within a pre-determined timeframe: April 10, 2017 through April 27, 2017. This period was chosen to mirror the date of the *Flight 3411* crisis through the release of the official review from United Airlines. However, it soon became apparent that the issue was not resolved, as United undoubtedly had hoped, and so additional stories were identified for several more months. It was important to be flexible when preparing data for analysis, for failing to identify and include all relevant data could tarnish the findings of this study.

This thesis comprised a meaning-oriented method of textual analysis. Based partially on the research of Smith and Taffler (2000), this approach focuses on the underlying themes in the observed texts rather than the volume of specific words and / or phrases. It was also deemed prudent to evaluate the data both as whole statements and individual words. This decision was taken as crisis communication is a complex subject and analyzing through one lens alone could fail to capture certain intricacies.

The language and tone of United's messaging when describing Dr. Dao and his fellow passengers, as well as the involved staff members, was taken into consideration. The length of each communiqué was also noted, as was the channel used. Similarly, news coverage was analyzed with tone and sentiment being addressed at the outset. This textual analysis moved chronologically, developing a 'layered timeline' of United's crisis response and the subsequent coverage. Once all available data had been collected and examined, it was hoped that through this 'timeline' one could compare crisis response strategy against news coverage.

Overall, this methodology can be considered appropriate because it is somewhat simple to understand that United Airlines handled this crisis poorly. It is harder, however, to fully comprehend how their crisis strategy unfolded through the event, following the social media backlash and video release, and how this was responded to in the media.

The following codes were identified, drawing on both the theoretical frameworks considered, and the literature analyzed in preparation for this study.[3]

Deny:	**Diminish**:	**Deal**:
– Naïve	– Excuses	– Compensation
- Denial	- Intention denial	– Compassion
– Sophisticated	- Agency denial	– Apology
- Attack / Accuse	– Justification	– Bolstering
– Scapegoat		– Ingratiation

[3] It must be noted that the word "denial" is included on two occasions under the *diminish* category. To avoid confusion with either *naïve denial* or *sophisticated denial*, clarification must be proffered. *Intention denial* refers to an organization claiming that it did not mean for a crisis to occur, but a moderate degree of attribution is still acknowledged. Similarly, *agency denial* refers to a situation in which an organization claims to have been unable to control the situation and therefore must not be held fully accountable.

Data Sources

United Airlines Communication:

1. Initial Public Response	Monday April 10, 2017
2. First (Internal) Email to Employees	Monday April 10, 2017
3. Second (External) Email to Employees	Tuesday April 11, 2017
4. "Good Morning America" Interview	Wednesday April 12, 2017
5. Press Conference Reactionary News Release	Thursday April 13, 2017
6. 'Customer Service Changes' News Release	Thursday April 27, 2017
7. 'Resolution' News Release	Thursday April 27, 2017
8. Review & Action Report	Thursday April 27, 2017

Table 2: News Coverage Selected for Qualitative Analysis

Outlet	Timeframe	Number of Articles
The *New York Times*	April 10 – October 17	16
The *Washington Post*	April 10 – October 18	16
The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*	April 10 – October 19	9
The *Los Angeles Times*	April 10 – September 6	12
The *Chicago Tribune*	April 10 – July 25	10

CHAPTER 6

FINDINGS

This chapter, organized in two categories, presents and evaluates the results from the qualitative analysis of the aforementioned data. Neither additional research literature nor the implications of these findings will be discussed at this juncture.

As outlined in the methodology, a 'layered timeline' of the United Airlines *Flight 3411* crisis will first be presented. This will comprise both the communications from United, as well as the subsequent news coverage. The term 'layered' refers to the presentation style used, for the news analysis will be interwoven with the varying communications from United. This allows for the development of said 'timeline', from which conclusions can be drawn. In this second phase, the researcher will return to the research questions and hypotheses to answer the successes and failures of this thesis.

6.1 'Layered Timeline'

United Airlines released their initial press statement on Monday, April 10. The somewhat brief memo, released on the official United Airlines Twitter account (@united), opened by labeling *Flight 3411* "an upsetting event to all of us here at United." Hovering between the victim and accidental crisis clusters, per Coombs' SCCT model, United's first crisis management strategy evidently sought to minimize potential attributions of

crisis responsibility. Indeed – considering the negative sentiment already swirling around this event on social media, as noted in Chapter 2.3, it is somewhat unexpected to see *diminish* strategies being predominantly used.

United does, however, move on to "apologize for having to re-accommodate" customers aboard *Flight 3411*. An initial assessment of this would, likely, conclude that an apology is being issued. However, this social media press release cannot yet be categorized as a *deal* strategy for several reasons. The language and tone throughout is both generic and vague. At no point is Dr. Dao mentioned, nor is there any indication that a physical alteration took place. This suggests the possibility of a *naïve denial* strategy. A failure to acknowledge an episode captured on video could be considered – to paraphrase the popular saying – *denial* by omission.

A quantitative assessment of this primary response would likely disagree with the researcher. After all, United uses language that may lead one to conclude that the organization has accepted responsibility and wishes to make amends. However, in considering additional factors it is evident that United Airlines is using such language in an attempt to placate its stakeholders. The brevity, slow release time, and vague language all suggest that *diminish* and (to a lesser extent) *deny* strategies are being used.

The preliminary coverage of *Flight 3411* from the majority of news outlets was not particularly concerned with this release. Indeed, the aforementioned video footage dominating social media at this time was at the center of most discussions. The behavior

of the flight crew and airport security staff was criticized, with *The New York Times* dubbing the incident a "disturbing scene" (Victor & Stevens, 2017). Similarly, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (*AJC*) and the *Chicago Tribune* opted not to comment on the Twitter statement. Indeed, the *Tribune* did not even cover the confrontation at this point. Later, the outlet provided a transcript of Munoz's statement but elected not to comment on or analyze his words.

Frederick Kunkle (2017) of *The Washington Post* briefly mentioned the tweet but chose to focus on broader issues including airline overbooking and seemed less concerned with United Airlines' communication strategies. The *Los Angeles Times*, on the other hand, highlighted the "Orwellian doublespeak" used in this social media release (Hiltzik, 2017). It was posited that United ought not to have started an apology by feeling sorry for itself, and that "the airline's initial response to the publicity already has left it covered in shame" (Hiltzik, 2017). However – for the most part, the presence of video footage and social media outrage dictated early media coverage.

Having briefly communicated with United's myriad stakeholders, Munoz then emailed his staff and offered an almost entirely opposing view of events. It must be noted that this message was never intended for public consumption – a point that becomes immediately clear. Munoz, in direct contrast with his external communication, writes at length with a far more assertive tone. Moving toward *sophisticated denial* strategies, this message continually emphasizes United employees as the victims of *Flight 3411*.

Stating that Dr. Dao "defied Chicago Aviation Security Officers," Munoz firmly places United within the victim cluster. Dr. Dao again is not named, yet Munoz uses this communiqué as an opportunity to both attack him and use him as scapegoat. Dao, the injured party, is portrayed continually as the aggressor – described as "disruptive and belligerent" – who raised his voice and acted in defiance of both United Airlines' flight and ground crews.

In contrast, Munoz employs language such as "apologetically" and "politely" to represent the actions of his organization. Further, he refers on numerous occasions to the "established procedures" that were followed by the flight crew. Such language clearly seeks to depict Dao as an antagonist, with United Airlines the victim. This could certainly be considered *justification*, a *diminish* strategy, for Munoz repeatedly indicates that Dao left the crew with no choice.

In addition to these linguistic disparities, there is a sharp contrast in the length of these two preliminary messages. Munoz, in his external memo, claimed that United would conduct a "detailed review" of events before discussing the incident further. However, in communicating with employees, a thorough summary of events is confidently presented. Through a combination of *attacking*, *condemning*, and *scapegoating*, it is evident that *sophisticated denial* forms a central pillar of the crisis strategy employed in this internal document.

Thus far, Munoz appears to be having his cake and eating it. However, as referenced earlier, the internal message soon reached social media. Addressing this conflicting messaging, *The New York Times* condemns the "tone deaf" comments of Munoz (Creswell & Maheshwari, 2017). Likewise, the *Los Angeles Times* updated their initial coverage of *Flight 3411* once the internal email became public, suggesting that it came from "the playbook of how to dig oneself into an ever-deeper hole" (Hiltzik, 2017).

Interestingly, the *Chicago Tribune* opted not to cover the story until Munoz's internal memo was released. Even then, their reporting did not challenge the organization's rhetoric and instead merely included excerpts from Munoz discussing the "disruptive and belligerent" behavior of Dao (Marotti & Zumbach, 2017). It is also worth noting that the *AJC* and *Chicago Tribune* also chose to include numerous passenger accounts in their writing.

Nonetheless, it is apparent that coverage does at this point become increasingly concerned with United and their public relations messaging. Once crisis tactics stop being cohesive, media interest increases. Unless mistakes are being made, it is perhaps possible to avoid such attention.

Subsequently, on Tuesday, April 11, a second email is sent to United's employees. This time, the message is also distributed through United Airlines' press room. Immediately evident is the shift in tone from the initial, internal, email. Munoz assumes a more refined, eloquent position. His tone is less arrogant, and he spends the opening half of this

message continually stating how this “truly horrific event” made him both “disturbed” and sad.

On the surface, this could again appear to be an apologetic, sincere, message. Indeed, Munoz does “deeply apologize” for the incident. However, a deeper analysis suggests that United is in reality attempting to spin the situation to garner positive public sentiment. It is one thing to pursue public approval through transparent messaging and restorative acts, as outlined in the literature review, it is another to manipulate messaging in an attempt to sway the audience. Indeed, this is a key element in the negative opinions held by many concerning the public relations field.

In once again opting to refer to Dr. Dao as “the customer,” for example, United demonstrates an unwillingness to put a face to this crisis. In skirting around this element, the organization continues to minimize its attribution level.

Further, arguing that it is “never too late” to rectify the situation, Munoz also delivers an end-date for this situation. This maneuver at first could be considered a *deal* strategy, namely *ingratiation*, but his generic language suggests that Munoz is in fact attempting to prevent news coverage from looking beyond that particular month. Containing a crisis is, of course, vital. However, it is a bold decision to take from such a weakened standpoint.

Another unusual move is that Munoz does not reference his previous messages in this third memo. It would not be difficult to convince someone unfamiliar with *Flight 3411*

that this was indeed his first communication. It could even be suggesting that Munoz uses *naïve denial* against his own prior *sophisticated denial* strategies.

So, United would appear to have shifted towards a *deal* response strategy. However, qualitative analyses find that they are still in the *diminish* arena. *Agency denial* and (to a degree) *naïve denial*, in ignoring both Dao and the previous communication, are prevalent throughout.

Following this second, publically released, email, news coverage primarily concerns United Airlines' compensation efforts. None of the identified outlets offer a sympathetic tone, however. Rather, *The New York Times* and *AJC* both insinuate that much of the language in this latest release is generic public relations material that could be applied to any given crisis.[4]

The Washington Post does applaud Munoz for attempting this communication "do-over" in such a brief timeframe, but equally questions the sincerity of his words (McGregor, 2017). Deeming his shift in tone "abrupt," "unfathomable" and "whiplash-y," Munoz evidently did not escape unscathed even in the coverage that one might initially consider to be more favorable (McGregor, 2017).

The *Chicago Tribune*, again breaking from the pack, focuses on the involvement of the Chicago Police Department in connection to *Flight 3411*. Critiquing the police report

[4] The word 'generic' is used in this analysis to denote work that has received little to no real attention – another example of stereotypically poor public relations 'spin'.

filed, Eric Zorn (2017) laments that this was "just the kind of statement you'd have expected to read from police 10 years ago" and that it did not accurately reflect the incident as was captured on camera. Even though their target was the police rather than United, it is interesting to note that the same issues arose in both sets of coverage.

Following this latest media scrutiny, United sought to temporarily move away from written crisis response strategies. Instead, on Wednesday, April 12, Munoz appeared on ABC's *Good Morning, America*. The interviewer, Ms. Rebecca Jarvis, opened by asking how Munoz felt upon first watching the footage of the incident. Munoz instantly reiterated his earlier press release language, claiming that this was "a bad moment" for United and did not reflect the culture of the organization.

Speaking in a level, rehearsed, tone, Munoz seemed uncomfortable throughout the interview. Regardless of the question posed, there was always a pre-prepared response at hand. This is evident in the inclusion of statements such as: "That's my premise and that's my promise." This, along with the frequent references to the United Airlines "family" indicate pre-meditation and planning prior to the interview.

Jarvis then challenged Munoz on the widely condemned language used in his internal company memo. As with the second employee email, the response given could almost be categorized as *naïve denial*. Munoz claims that the words "fell short" of his meaning and does not acknowledge the harshness behind them. When specifics are raised, Munoz

simply moves back to discussing the "broader" subject issues surrounding *Flight 3411* and did not address this concern again.

Through the interview, Munoz employs *diminish* response strategies – principally, *agency denial* – in the varying excuses he presents. These tactics range from the failure of employees in not using "common sense" concerning pre-existing policies, to the influence of "law enforcement officials" in escalating the situation aboard *Flight 3411*.

Another noteworthy moment in this interview can be found in the pause taken when Munoz is asked if he considers Dr. Dao to be at fault in this episode. Forced to directly reference Dao for the first time, Munoz takes several seconds and was clearly unwilling to answer the question. Despite responding that "he [Dao] can't be" to blame, the silence must be addressed. Further, in contrast to his earlier answers, from this point Munoz provides shorter answers and does not elaborate on his thoughts.

Overall, this interview was somewhat paradoxical. Once again, Munoz clearly sought to dictate the flow of conversation but often fell short. Despite attempting to use *diminish* strategies, the organization was finally maneuvered into the *deal* response category. *Bolstering* and *ingratiation* are both prominent strategies witnessed, with *compensation* appearing to a lesser extent. Further, although one may initially read *compassion* in the transcript, the tone taken throughout this interview undercuts the words.

The news coverage of *Flight 3411* continues on a steady course, with few reporters now seeming convinced that Munoz genuinely feels any remorse. Several stories discuss the reimbursements made to customers, and others address Dr. Dao's medical condition – a topic that United has thus far notably failed to address.

The New York Times notes that Munoz did appear "more contrite" in the ABC interview but reports that he had in reality "done little to quell the outrage" felt in the public (Smith, 2017; Stack, 2017).

Indeed, *The New York Times* and *AJC* both posit that Munoz attempted to encode a message apparently designed to protect United and pacify customers by arguing that it followed established rules but would conduct a review of the situation. Clearly, the message that most customers received did not pacify them, but instead only further inflamed them.

The *Los Angeles Times* collected and published dire assessments from communications experts across the industry. One notable quote asserted that United had "destroyed the connection and trust they've built up over the years" and that Munoz had forever placed an asterisk by his 2017 Communicator of the Year award (Lien, 2017).

Again, the *Chicago Tribune* stayed mostly silent on this matter, with only a brief mention of the interview coming in a story concerning the suspension of two officers involved in

the *Flight 3411* incident. Munoz was deemed to have put a "human face" on the apology, but no notable discussion is offered (Zumbach & Marotti, 2017).

Shortly after the ABC interview, Dr. Dao's lawyer and daughter held a press conference in which several claims from United were refuted. Indeed, several stories reported that the Dao family believed the apologies had thus far been staged and that the organization had made no genuine efforts to contact them.

Addressing this latest setback, United issued another press release on Thursday, April 13. In this, the organization finally seems to admit a strong attribution of responsibility and adopts several *deal* response strategies. For example, the brief opening statement contains elements of *apology*, *compassion*, *compensation*, and *ingratiation*:

> 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.

Referencing Dao by name and accepting full responsibility for rectifying the situation both suggest an awareness that there is an undeniably severe reputational threat to the organization.

Further, one ought to note the repetition of several phrases through this release. These include the pledge that "this never happens again" and that this incident "provided a harsh learning experience" for United Airlines. This language indicates the implementation of an *ingratiation* strategy. However, in continually referring to the role of law enforcement it is worth stressing that United does still attempt to use *diminish*

crisis strategies – specifically *agency denial* – in conjunction with *deal* strategies, to lessen the impact on the organization's reputation.

Although a combination of *deal* strategies is indeed evident in this text, there is a lingering sense that these are insincere. The organization closes with yet another forward-looking statement, promising to release a full review of the event by the end of the month and looking to close the issue on their terms. Further, in the five days since the confrontation United admits to having no direct communication with Dr. Dao.

This announcement is met with a degree of skepticism, with *The Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times* both addressing the shift in attitude after his earlier "unapologetic tone" (Selk, 2017). However, United no longer receives the same level of open hostility as before. News coverage moves toward the airline industry as a whole, and Munoz's communication blunders are less in the firing line.

On April 25, however, an official police review concludes that "minimal but necessary force" was used against Dr. Dao on *Flight 3411* (Aratani & Phillips, 2017). Although this report came from the police department and was not connected to Munoz or United Airlines' communications staff, the organization is once more in the spotlight. This could explain the final official statements being released three days sooner than expected. The importance of being proactive perhaps, finally, being understood.

On April 27, following two weeks of silence, United Airlines released three separate but linked messages. The first, a press release, introduced and summarized the "Official Review and Action Report" (Appendix B; Number 8). In this, United continues *diminish* response strategies that distance the organization from accepting complete blame for *Flight 3411*. Their referencing of the "forced removal of a customer" and the move to "limit use of law enforcement" suggests that United did not have other options available in the moment and are looking to deal with similar situations themselves moving forward.

For the most part, however, it proved virtually impossible at this stage for United to refute the strong attribution of responsibility. Accordingly, *deal* strategies are used to present a positive image of the organization. Even so, this release is often vague and even offers guarantees that do not relate to this crisis:

> Eliminate the red tape on permanently lost bags by adopting a "no questions asked" policy on lost luggage.

This, it can be seen, is another combination of *bolstering* and *ingratiation* that fails to address the primary concerns surrounding *Flight 3411*. Further, promising "annual training" for United employees without offering additional details could even be considered a *diminish* strategy masquerading as *deal*. Munoz openly comments that training would benefit all employees, and in the same sentence subliminally hints that this incident was still not United's fault.

As with several of the previous releases, Munoz provides a closing quote. In this, he once more angles to dictate the news coverage. In presenting the "facts" of *Flight 3411* on the

United Airlines website – even claiming that "the headline is clear" – Munoz again discusses broader policy issues that shift the organization back to *diminish* strategies.

The same day, April 27, United issued an exceedingly brief press release announcing the "amicable resolution" between the organization and Dr. Dao. One sentence is devoted to this, before the organization again discusses the "improvements" that will be implemented over the coming months. Even when attribution of responsibility is at its strongest, United rapidly moves from *compensation* and *apology* to *bolstering* and *ingratiation*.

Moving away from considering crisis strategy selection, one must note the attempt to hide this announcement behind the far lengthier release distributed mere hours before. Analysis suggests that this is the weakest position yet for United and presenting this information in such a manner could be a move to dampen the impact.

However, several news outlets immediately identify the word 'amicable', almost using it mockingly in the reporting of this latest development. The *Los Angeles Times* notes that "none of the policy changes are particularly groundbreaking or even surprising" (Martin, 2017). That being said, coverage also quotes both crisis management and airline industry experts in praising the settlement, for failure to do so could have damaged "the reputation of United and the entire industry" (Martin & Raab, 2017).

Coverage also addressed the widespread influence of this crisis. *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune, The Washington Post, Los Angeles Times* and *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* all discuss the policy changes sweeping through the airline industry. Principally, these stories mention both Delta and American announcing their intentions to implement significant procedural reforms, hoping to avoid similar incidences.

In considering the lengthier 'official' report, issued through the organization's press room, it is important to note that United frequently offers a 'one-two' punch. The organization admits to a fault, then immediately claims that existing policies allowed and enforced such behavior. *Deal* and *diminish* strategies are blended and fused throughout:

> United's policies and procedures in non-safety or security situations did not adequately address instances in which customers refused to comply with requests.

Despite accepting its own procedural flaws, United still include language implying that Dr. Dao was uncooperative and difficult.

Further, an appendix was provided in this review outlining several "causes of denied boarding" in which a similar situation could possibly arise. Little to no advice was given concerning this, either in the body of text or in the appendices.

Finally, at no point in any of these official reviews were the crisis management failures of this saga addressed. Neither United Airlines nor Munoz ever openly admitted to being at fault, which was a significant concern in much of the aforementioned news coverage. Indeed, as CEO of United Airlines, Munoz would certainly be regarded as a trustworthy

source in terms of representing the organization. In many ways he would be in a strong position to affect change if he desired to do so. Hence, when he continually gave what came across as an insufficient apology, the damage worsened time and again. It is telling that the organization once more denies this concern.

The palpable vitriol of earlier stories has dissipated in this later coverage and reporting on the official action report is mostly simplistic and to the point. *The New York Times* still refers to the incident with adjectives such as "ugly" but Munoz and United escape unscathed. The only story concerning Munoz, written for *The New York Times*, discusses the decision against promoting him to the position of chairman (Meier, 2017).

In subsequent months, long after United Airlines' final communications, numerous outlets report on the firing of the two security officials involved. Again, only the *Chicago Tribune* opts not to cover this. Instead, the *Tribune* reports on the varying implications of *Flight 3411* for Chicago. Although there is much to unpack, this concerns neither Munoz nor United directly and therefore will not be addressed here.

6.2 Analysis

Having presented a comprehensive qualitative analysis of the crisis messaging from United Airlines following *Flight 3411*, as well as the subsequent news coverage, it is now important to return to the previously stated research questions and hypotheses.

It was first hypothesized that "United Airlines will seek to employ a *diminish* response strategy but may be forced into a *deal* response strategy." Both confirming and rejecting the referenced crisis literature, United Airlines most commonly used *sophisticated denial* and *diminish* crisis response strategies. The former was attempted on four separate occasions and the latter included in no fewer than seven messages. Surprisingly, *naïve denial* responses were observed both in Munoz' first email to his employees as well as when he sought to move past previous (unsuccessful) communication efforts.

The researcher also found that genuine *deal* strategies were employed on three occasions. It is important to stress that the qualitative methodology used in this thesis discounted numerous disingenuous *deal* responses. Without this level of scrutiny, another paper could have concluded that *deal* strategies – especially *bolstering*, *ingratiation* and *compassion* – to be among the more common responses.

It is evident that *Flight 3411* was far more complex than was first hypothesized. Ultimately, almost every crisis response strategy outlined in the theoretical frameworks was attempted over the principal two-week period examined (April 9, 2017 – April 27, 2017). This is arguably where much of the criticism originated, for the inconsistency of crisis response strategy portrayed a company moving in no defined direction.

To this point – going against the essential philosophies of crisis management research and entirely rejecting the second hypothesis presented – United Airlines did vary their crisis response strategies internally and externally. This drew the ire of the media and

positioned Munoz on a crumbling platform, for his messaging was henceforth received with a larger-than-average grain of salt.

United also failed to maintain consistency in its response strategies through the identified crisis timeline. Despite reaching this conclusion, it is interesting to note that similar language was often used in the various communications. The shifting tones and subliminal messaging, as well as the extended interview pauses, betrayed Munoz and gave his critics ammunition.

Moving forward, the third hypothesis stated that "news framing of this event will not mirror United Airline's own messaging but will change over time to reflect public sentiment on social media." The findings presented confirm this, as news coverage of this crisis did indeed reflect public sentiment. Specifically, online versions of stories frequently included screenshots of tweets concerning the events. Further, opinions and quotes from passengers on *Flight 3411*, as well as crisis experts, were often included in stories. United's messaging was certainly cited in the majority of outlets considered. However, this was more often a point of criticism and a segue into further analysis of the video footage and procedural faults.

It must be noted that one outlet, the *Chicago Tribune*, bucked this trend. Their coverage of *Flight 3411* often mirrored United's messaging, and only once a settlement was reached between those involved was any notable critique levelled at the organization. It is possible that this distinction occurred as the incident transpired at Chicago O'Hare

International Airport.[5] The ramifications of this crisis were more immediate and widespread here, and the *Tribune* focused on those issues that were influencing the city more than United.

The differences between the *Tribune* and the other outlets included in this study could conceivably be a result of advertising revenue connections between United Airlines, a prominent business in Chicago, and the *Chicago Tribune*. Of course, this is conjecture and additional study is required before one could assert this with much confidence. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that this incident occurred at a deeply significant location for this organization.

Overall, this research indicates that organizations facing a complex crisis are increasingly hindered when attempting to dictate their own narrative. Of course, *Flight 3411* does represent a somewhat 'extreme' crisis. There are those who argue that United Airlines never stood a chance when attempting to guide media coverage. However, it can be posited that had the organization followed the aforementioned crisis management protocols it could have better led its own messaging.

That being said, it is possible to guide news coverage, to a certain extent, but the influence of social media and outside commentators are ever more prominent in traditional news stories. Further, sub-par crisis responses markedly increase news coverage and further disable an organization from directing the narrative.

[5] United Airlines does operate out of several hubs in major US cities, including Chicago O'Hare International Airport. However, the organization is also headquartered in Chicago, Illinois.

This thesis has numerous implications, both for crisis practitioners and scholars. These will now be addressed, along with the opportunities available for future research and the limitations that must be acknowledged when considering this analysis.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION

This final chapter explores the limitations of this thesis, as well as the implications of the research conducted. The potential for future avenues of study will then be considered, before a few overarching conclusions are drawn. It is not the purpose of this section to reiterate what was found in the data analysis, but rather to discuss what these findings could mean in relation to the profession and study of public relations and crisis communications.

7.1 Limitations of Study

This study has several acknowledged limitations. First, only five news outlets were considered for data selection and analysis. Although this decision was deemed acceptable for this particular study, primarily by virtue of time and resource restrictions, it is important to note that these five do not represent the news media as a whole. Neither smaller publications nor 'non-traditional' sources – for example, *Buzzfeed* or the *Huffington Post* – were analyzed.

In a similar vein, television and radio coverage of this crisis were not examined. The one exception to this, of course, being the ABC interview conducted with United CEO Oscar

Munoz. However, this was considered one of United's communication strategies and so was not scrutinized from the perspective of the media.

Similarly, the role of social media, especially Twitter, has been addressed at numerous points throughout this study. It therefore stands to reason that a potential limitation is the failure to qualitatively analyze social media posts concerning *Flight 3411*. This would have enabled the researcher to approach the research questions more holistically, since news coverage is becoming increasingly tied into public sentiment through social media.

Moving away from concerns regarding the data used, one must also acknowledge potential methodological limitations. It stands to reason that interviewing crisis practitioners and experts within the airline industry could have added dimensions to the findings presented. The insight of those well-versed in the language of this business could offer additional layers of understanding to the messages from United.

Although it has been considered an advantage through this project, the qualitative approach taken could perhaps be thought of by some as a limitation. There is an argument for implementing a dual-methodology, where both "form oriented" and "meaning oriented" analyses are conducted (Smith & Taffler, 2000). Certainly, there are factions of academia that might be more inclined to consider the study if that were the case. Yet, this is arguably for critics to decide and such a change could establish an entirely new project.

Having completed this thesis, however, the author maintains that a wholly qualitative approach has proven to be far more than merely adequate. This methodological approach was both rigorous and scientific, and enabled numerous conclusions to be drawn from the data. Further, this method enabled the author to enjoy an enhanced degree of creativity in the writing of this work. Altering this, to allow for quantitative methods, could potentially remove this component.

7.2 Implications

In considering the implications of this study, *Flight 3411* presents something of an unusual scenario. Specifically, this crisis truly does comprise 'basic' public relations errors. There is no revelation to be made that is not already considered fundamental knowledge among crisis scholars and practitioners alike. However, this episode does strengthen the arguments of numerous academics for the development and renewal of comprehensive crisis management programs. Although much of this information is readily available, it is nevertheless worth stating the primary learning points to come from this research.

First, it is important to understand that public relations practitioners are rarely afforded the opportunity to dictate media narratives following a crisis. Indeed, it is crucial that organizations pay attention to both print and online news coverage. Further, constant close monitoring of social media sentiment can provide a warning system for incoming crises, as well as indicating in real-time the successes and failures of crisis strategies

being used. Social media, as it continues to develop, must be incorporated into all levels of crisis communication strategies.

That is not to say this thesis recommends a systemic reimagining of all existing crisis strategies and procedures. On the contrary, prevailing tactics concerning traditional media remain as valid as ever yet could arguably be strengthened with additional measures for dealing with social media firestorms.

Another implication of this study is the underpinning of the argument for organizations ensuring both clarity and consistency in all communications following a crisis. Further, the immediate issuing of a sincere apology can help prevent crises from escalating – regardless of concrete data such as video footage. A ready-to-respond crisis team is also recommended, although if senior management wishes to address an issue then prior to release all communications ought to be reviewed.

In addition to its practical influences, the researcher also wishes to highlight two key pedagogical implications of this study. First, journalism and mass communication programs must make an effort to discourage the notion of 'us against them' regarding students of journalism and public relations. It is widely understood that there is animosity between the two fields, as evidenced in this thesis. However, strengthening connections between the two, at the grassroots level, could potentially develop fruitful relationships that would prove beneficial both during crises and day to day operations.

Finally, it is critical that institutions of higher education continue to develop courses in both social media analytics and crisis communications. As these branches of public relations evolve, so too must those who teach them. That being said, the fundamental lesson from this thesis is the continued value of clear and concise writing. Students must continue to be guided toward becoming competent writers, for this proved to be at the core of the *Flight 3411* crisis.

7.3 Future Research

This thesis represents a useful platform for future research, primarily as a direct result of the findings presented in conjunction with the aforementioned limitations. Studies of this nature could continue to address the research questions approached in this paper and could potentially develop additional avenues of research over time.

Research projects examining the influence of social media, as well as additional online news sources, have the potential to expand and diversify this field. It is possible that a consideration of social media could require the use of new theoretical frameworks, such as the social-mediated crisis communication model (Austin & Jin, 2018).

The author contends that the theoretical frameworks implemented here, notably Coombs' (2018) situational crisis communication theory, will likely continue to evolve and guide public relations scholarship for years to come. It cannot yet be asserted with any surety if the frameworks mentioned in this study will eventually be replaced by newer models. However, these developing fields within mass communication theory (such as Austin and

Jin's social-mediated crisis communication model) are undoubtedly worth monitoring as they could one day signal the coming of a new age in public relations research.

Building on the conclusions drawn in this thesis, in particular those concerning the *Chicago Tribune*, another potential avenue could consider the relationship between the location of news outlet and the crisis epicenter. Such studies would likely question whether crisis reporting varies as one moves further from the crisis epicenter.

Finally, it is hoped that similar research is conducted that examines either different crises within the airline industry or similar crises within a different industry. Implementing a similar methodology, but with different research parameters, could expand and build on this thesis. Over time, these projects would generate a composite of crisis case histories for practitioners to refer to in times of need.

7.4 Conclusions

This thesis addressed the April 2017 United Airlines public relations crisis concerning the events on-board *United Express Flight 3411*. The researcher sought to understand whether the influence of traditional media hindered an organization in framing their own narrative following a crisis. Following a comprehensive qualitative analysis of content from both United Airlines and five major news outlets, it was found that news coverage does indeed prevent this. Consequently, this information provided suggestions for both crisis practitioners and scholars.

In closing, it is worth restating the importance of continually evolving crisis management plans in alliance with crisis scholarship. As the expansion of social media forges a new technological landscape, crisis communicators must rapidly adjust existing practices to avoid falling prey to the myriad pitfalls hidden from view.

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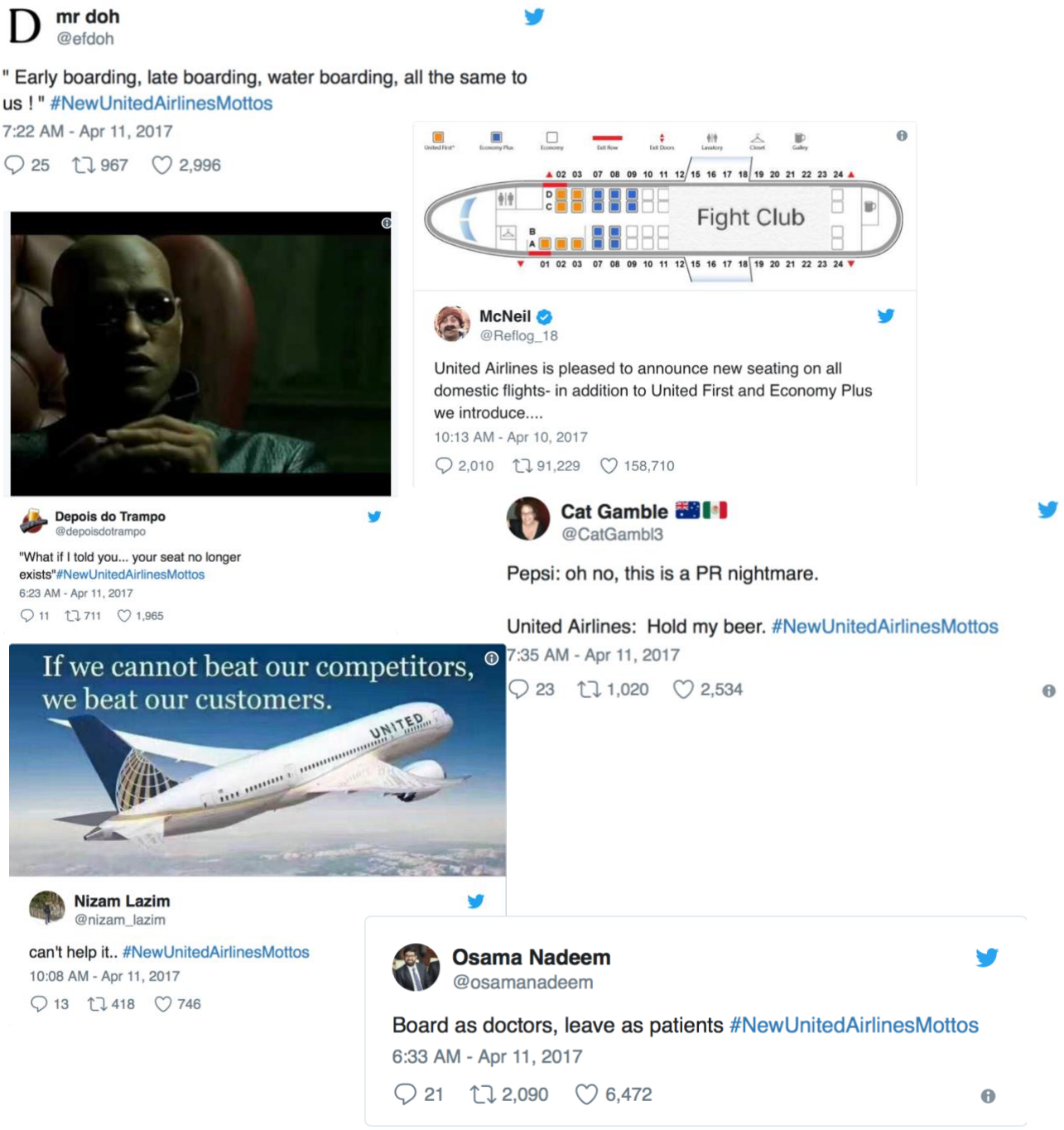
APPENDICES

Appendix A – Sample Tweets Using the Hashtag #NewUnitedAirlinesMottos



Appendix B – United Airlines Crisis Communications

1. Initial Public Response:

Monday April 10, 2017. (12:18 p.m.)

http://newsroom.united.com/news-releases?item=124753

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.

Oscar Munoz, CEO, United Airlines

2. First (Internal) Email to Employees:

Monday April 10, 2017. (Time Unknown.)

https://apnews.com/01bf37fd33f04cc7a097c9cce5d557fe

Dear Team,

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 *deal*ing 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

Summary of Flight 3411

- 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.

3. Second (External) Email to Employees:

Tuesday April 11, 2017. (2:56 p.m.)

http://newsroom.united.com/news-releases?item=124755

Dear Team,

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.

Sincerely,
Oscar

4. "Good Morning America" Interview:

Wednesday April 12, 2017 (4:00 p.m.)

http://abcnews.go.com/US/united-ceo-oscar-munoz-felt-sham-passenger-dragged/story?id=46746594

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90jSUe_vdhM

Rebecca Jarvis: Oscar, this incident has sparked outrage around the world. There are calls this morning to boycott your brand. What did you think when you saw that video of a man being dragged off one of your planes?

Oscar Munoz: Good morning and thank you for having me. Erm … it's not so much what I thought, it's what I felt. Probably the word 'ashamed' comes to mind. You know, as I think about our business and our people … erm, the first thing I think is important to say [sic] is to apologize to Dr. Dao, his family, the passengers on that flight, our customers, our employees. That is not who our family – United – is … and, you saw us at a bad moment … and, this can never, will never happen again on a United Airlines flight. That's my premise and that's my promise.

RJ: Why not communicate that shame, as you call it, initially? In your initial apology, in your initial statement, you apologized for "re-accommodating" passengers, and in your internal notes to your employees you talked about a "belligerent" and "disruptive" passenger. Why did it take until Tuesday to offer a more full-hearted apology?

OM: I think my first reaction to most issues is to get the facts of the circumstances, and my initial words fell short of truly expressing what we were feeling … and that is something that I have learned from. The expression of apology, and specific to the folks that I mentioned before, is an important part of a conversation like this because again, that shame and embarrassment was pretty palpable for me and for a lot of our family.

RJ: You've said that this will never happen again. What will you be doing to ensure that promise?

OM: Well, as I have outlined in some of my messaging … is really around reviewing … a fairly deep and thorough review of a lot of our policies that support this. Specifically, if I were to be here today – as I am – I would tell you that the use of law enforcement aboard an aircraft has to be looked at very carefully. They're clearly there for the purpose of safety, and we want to make sure they protect us. But, for other reasons, I think that's a policy we have to absolutely relook at.

RJ: What went wrong, in this scenario?

OM: It was a system failure … We have not provided our front-line supervisors and managers and individuals with the proper tools, policies, procedures that allow them to use their common sense. They all have an incredible amount of common sense, and this issue could've been solved by that. That's on me, I have to fix that … and I think that's something that we can do.

RJ: What needs to change here, specifically, because if you look at the policy – and a lot of people learned this week, through this story and are surprised to learn that in the fine print, you can be asked to leave a flight involuntarily without any compensation as you decided. What needs specifically to change here? Were those flight attendants, were those employees of United, were they not enabled to offer people more money to voluntarily leave that flight?

OM: I … I think, again, back to the broader system issue … I think there's many of those points that we need to relook at. There's an incentive program that works pretty well outside of the gate. Clearly, when you get into an airplane and your boarded with your luggage and you're situated … your incentive model needs to change, and I think that's one of the policies that we'll look at. We do empower our front-line folks to a degree, but again we need to expand and adjust those policies, to again allow a little bit more common sense.

RJ: In the future, if no one voluntarily decides to leave a plane – based on the amount of money United is offering …

OM [interrupting]: We are not going to put a law enforcement official to take them off the aircraft.
RJ: A law enforcement official will *never* come on one of your planes again?

OM: To remove a booked, paid, seating [sic] passenger. We can't do that.

RJ: Have you spoken to Dr. Dao?

OM: I have not. I have reached out to him, and have left a message, and our team has tried to reach him on several occasions. We've not been able to contact him directly. I do look forward to a time when I can … [pause] as much as I am able to, apologize directly to him for what has happened.

RJ: What do you think he deserves, in all of this?

OM: Well, certainly an apology … and, from that point on, I think we will have to see.

RJ: Do you think he's at fault, in any way?

OM [long pause]: No, he can't be. He was a paying passenger, sitting on our seat, on our aircraft, and no one should be treated that way. Period.

RJ: There are a number of PR professionals who believe that this was handled improperly by you and your company, and some are even calling for you to resign. Have you considered that option?

OM: No. I was hired to make United better, and we've been doing that and that's what I'll continue to do.

5. Press Conference Reactionary News Release:

Thursday April 13, 2017. (12:29 p.m.)

http://newsroom.united.com/news-releases?item=124756

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.

6. ‘Customer Service Changes’ News Release:

Thursday April 27, 2017. (1:04 a.m.)

http://newsroom.united.com/2017-04-27-United-Airlines-Announces-Changes-to-Improve-Customer-Experience

United Airlines (UAL) today announced 10 substantial changes to how it flies, serves and respects its customers. The changes are the result of United's thorough examination of its policies and procedures, and commitment to take action, in the wake of the forced removal of a customer aboard United Express Flight 3411 on April 9.

United commits to:

- Limit use of law enforcement to safety and security issues only.
- Not require customers seated on the plane to give up their seat involuntarily unless safety or security is at risk.
- Increase customer compensation incentives for voluntary denied boarding up to $10,000.
- Establish a customer solutions team to provide agents with creative solutions such as using nearby airports, other airlines or ground transportations to get customers to their final destination.
- Ensure crews are booked onto a flight at least 60 minutes prior to departure.
- Provide employees with additional annual training.
- Create an automated system for soliciting volunteers to change travel plans.
- Reduce the amount of overbooking.
- Empower employees to resolve customer service issues in the moment.
- Eliminate the red tape on permanently lost bags by adopting a "no questions asked" policy on lost luggage.

While several of these policies are effective immediately, others will be rolled out through the remainder of the year. The facts of what happened aboard Flight 3411 and a full review of United's changes can be found at hub.united.com.

Oscar Munoz, chief executive officer of United Airlines, said, "Every customer deserves to be treated with the highest levels of service and the deepest sense of dignity and respect. Two weeks ago, we failed to meet that standard and we profoundly apologize. However, actions speak louder than words. Today, we are taking concrete, meaningful action to make things right and ensure nothing like this ever happens again."

"Our review shows that many things went wrong that day, but the headline is clear: our policies got in the way of our values and procedures interfered in doing what's right. This is a turning point for all of us at United and it signals a culture shift toward becoming a better, more customer-focused airline. Our customers should be at the center of everything we do, and these changes are just the beginning of how we will earn back their trust," he added.

7. ‘Resolution’ News Release:

Thursday April 27, 2017 (3:23 p.m.)

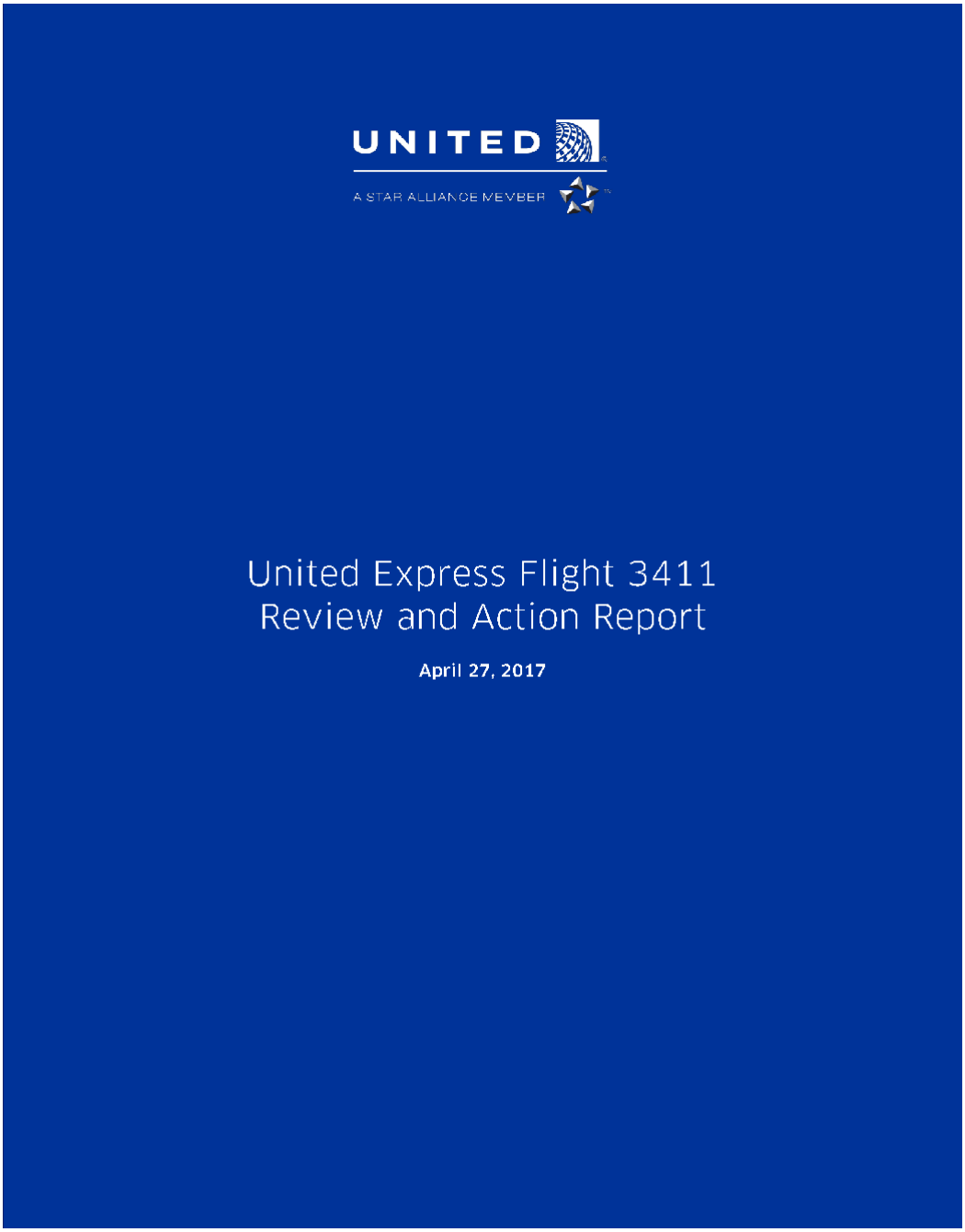
http://newsroom.united.com/2017-04-27-Statement-from-United-Airlines-Regarding-Resolution-with-Dr-David-Dao

We are pleased to report that United and Dr. Dao have reached an amicable resolution of the unfortunate incident that occurred aboard flight 3411. We look forward to implementing the improvements we have announced, which will put our customers at the center of everything we do.

8. Review & Action Report:

Thursday April 27, 2017.

For full document, please visit:
https://s3.amazonaws.com/unitedhub/United+Flight+3411+Review+and+Action+Report.pdf?utm_source=hub.united.com&utm_medium=referral



Appendix C – List of Analyzed News Coverage

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