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United Airlines and how the 'digital lynch mob' is changing reputation risk for business

14 APRIL 2017 BY JEREMY HOLLAND



Reputation risk in the age of social media is becoming more and more difficult to pin down. Executives fumble when their company becomes the target of the outraged digital masses. The recent incident with United is a prime example. However, new technologies are making it easier for organisations to understand conversations that are happening about them

online, helping them be more prepared to deal with crises when they erupt, seemingly out of nowhere.

By now, everyone with internet access has heard about the fiasco that occurred on United Airlines flight 3411 the other day, when a passenger who refused to be bumped off the oversold flight was dragged off by security officers. Videos of his bloodied face muttering “I need to go home” has stoked the collective outrage of anyone who’s experienced the indignity of commercial air travel in America.

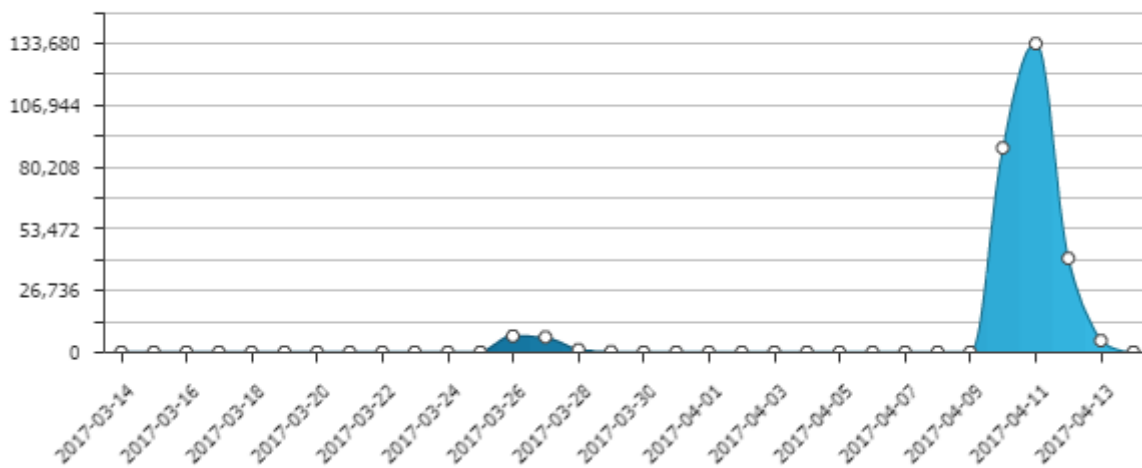
Oscar Munoz, CEO of United-Continental, fumbled his reaction to the incident. Even as Twitter was exploding Munoz provided a lack-lustre apology and sent around a memo to his employees blaming the incident on the passenger’s bad behaviour. After a few days of continued internet fury and a large drop in the company’s share price, he finally issued a contrite apology on the airline’s website and even promised to give all the passengers on the flight a full refund. Apparently, he will still need to deal with [the passenger’s lawyers](#).

The incident at United demonstrates that business leaders sorely underestimate the power that so-called [‘digital lynch mobs’](#) wield in damaging a company’s reputation. When scandals erupt, executives seem perplexed about where it came from and don’t seem to take it very seriously. Their awkward reactions are a dead giveaway. Take Mylan CEO Heather Bresch. When she was recently accused of lining her pockets by price gouging on EpiPens, she absent-mindedly [posed for a photo](#) next to a binder on her desk that read ‘compensation review with the CEO’.

And the mainstream media isn’t much better at understanding the collective mood of social media. United Airlines faced another Twitter storm a few weeks ago after two women were refused boarding because their [leggings](#) were deemed inappropriate attire for travel. The news media picked it up, but seemed to over-estimate how much

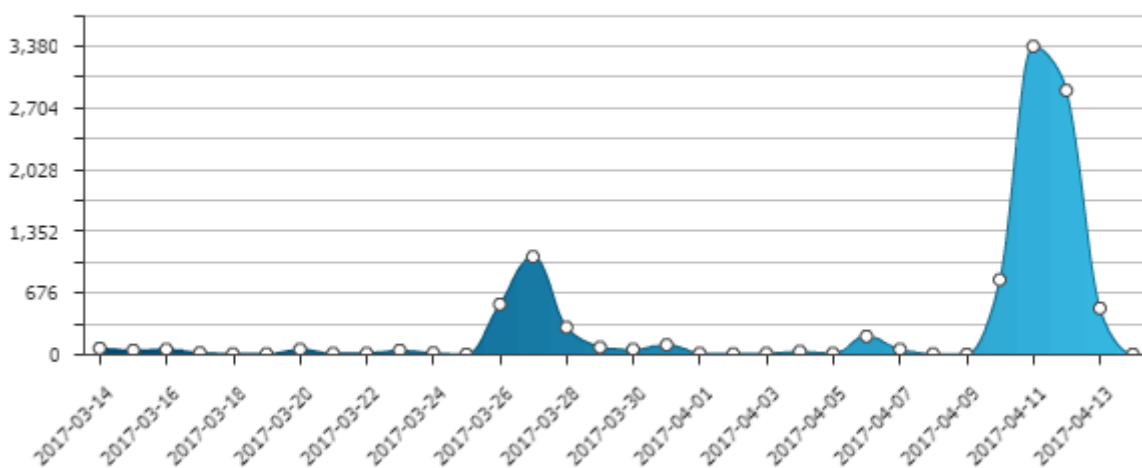
the internet really cared about that incident. The two charts below compare the volume of social media conversations about United Airlines to news media postings over the last 30 days.

Force Volume of Activity



Social Media

Force Volume of Activity



News Media

In terms of the proportion of postings, the news media devoted much more coverage to the leggings incident than did social media. 20% of coverage for the month compared to just 4% respectively. It seems

clear that the media misunderstood what consumers really cared about. They ostensibly saw a bit of traction on Twitter and decided to run with it, but failed to see the bigger picture. The same could be said about Munoz and United Airlines. The chart below shows that conversations about United Airlines on social media were already skewed toward complaints about customer service and discrimination well before the incidents of the last several days. Perhaps if United management had known that they would have reacted differently in both cases.

Risk Radar



Why do businesses and the media miss the mark when it comes to understanding the nuances of social media conversations? Perhaps it has to do with an inability to make sense of the fire hose of data that comes out of social media. Fortunately, new technologies are able to better analyse conversations online, providing businesses with better insights into conversations that are happening about them behind their digital backs. This will enable companies to be more nimble in their responses because they will better understand where

the uproar came from. In the case of United, passengers were already tense about customer service and discrimination and Sunday's incident only inflamed those tensions.

The digital age brings with it new risks for a company's reputation. The so-called 'digital lynch mob' of social media lays in wait for the next opportunity to be selectively outraged. Companies can be better prepared by using advanced technology to monitor conversations to better understand where that outrage comes from and react accordingly.



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