



The real-time power of Twitter: Crisis management and leadership in an age of social media

Daniel A. Gruber^a, Ryan E. Smerek^b, Melissa C. Thomas-Hunt^c,
Erika H. James^{d,*}

^a *Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications, Northwestern University, 1870 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208, U.S.A.*

^b *School of Education & Social Policy, Northwestern University, 2120 Campus Drive Evanston, IL 60208, U.S.A.*

^c *Darden School of Business, University of Virginia, P.O. Box 6550, Charlottesville, VA 22906-6500 U.S.A.*

^d *Goizueta Business School, Emory University, 1300 Clifton Road, Suite 530, Atlanta, GA 30322, U.S.A.*

KEYWORDS

Crisis;
Social media;
Leadership;
Expertise;
Twitter

Abstract This article focuses on crisis management and leadership by executives, boards, and institutions and applies research on resilience, power, and sensemaking in the analysis of the ousting and subsequent return of a chief executive by the board of directors. Insights are shared on the transparency of information, the power of social media, the role of leaders in a crisis, and the ability of different voices to be heard and exert influence in our social media age. This case study provides a set of recommendations for leadership and crisis management in the contemporary business environment by showing how a crisis can be fueled by social media. Twitter is analyzed as a source of real-time news and information, which can have a significant impact on organizations and their strategies. Furthermore, implications for new executives are highlighted, with a focus on how their initial sensemaking process shapes the ability to respond to a crisis.

© 2014 Kelley School of Business, Indiana University. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Organizational crises in and around social media

Organizational crises can be catalyzed by a variety of factors and can have devastating consequences. Crises have been defined as “rare, significant, and public situations that create highly undesirable outcomes for the firm and its stakeholders”

* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: d-gruber@northwestern.edu (D.A. Gruber),
ryan.smerek@northwestern.edu (R.E. Smerek),
thomashuntm@arden.virginia.edu (M.C. Thomas-Hunt),
erika.james@emory.edu (E.H. James)

(James & Wooten, 2010, p. 17). In the contemporary business environment, crises have become more frequent and severe (James, Wooten, & Dushek, 2011). One of the reasons for this increase in salience and severity is social media, as organizations struggle to make sense of how to manage and lead in this new ecosystem (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Social media has accelerated the speed at which information is shared, amplified the reach of messages, and solidified the ability of disparate individuals to organize. Some crises originate on social media, while others start offline and are brought to social media only if they are otherwise not resolved. The microblogging site Twitter has become one of the most powerful social media platforms through which organizations communicate with stakeholders (Alexander & Gentry, 2014). Therefore, it is critical that scholars and practitioners understand the real-time power of Twitter and its implications for crisis management and leadership.

In this article, an unprecedented sequence of events at the University of Virginia (UVA) is analyzed to illuminate theoretical and practical implications of managing crises in the age of social media. On Friday, June 8, 2012, after serving as president of the university for 2 years, Teresa Sullivan was asked to resign by the head of the Board of Visitors (BOV) due to the strategy—or perceived lack thereof—of the university. The subsequent firestorm on the Charlottesville, Virginia campus and on social media among students, alumni, faculty, the media, and other key stakeholders, led the board to reinstate Sullivan less than 3 weeks later. While the mainstream media documented the events with great interest, it was social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, YouTube) that actually participated as an active medium for the sharing of news and information in real time, enabling stakeholders to express their opinions and rally together. Social media became a mechanism through which to push for transparency and action from the board. Moreover, this organizational crisis at UVA was self-inflicted, as it originated from actions by the university's board and exposed a critical organizational blind spot: The decision making and sensemaking of the board were disconnected from social media, where the crisis was growing and stakeholders were organizing. The metaphorical fire of the crisis that originated offline, prompted by a board decision, continued to grow on social media, and ultimately the only way to remedy the situation was to reverse course and reinstate the ousted president. This reinstatement on June 26, 2012, resulted in a surprising display of unification, with the stakeholders rallying around the president and, ultimately, the university.

This article results from the distillation of empirical evidence gathered during the events, as well as in the aftermath. A search for articles in news publications about the UVA presidential crisis was conducted to form the foundation of our analysis. Several of these news articles were based on Freedom of Information Act requests spurred by social media, which led to the release of e-mails between board members. The e-mails were a major focus of the analysis. Official statements and speeches from the BOV and the president were also studied. Social media posts, hashtags, and groups on Twitter and Facebook were examined both during the crisis and in the aftermath of the events. Finally, it is important to note that two of the authors of this article were faculty members at UVA when the events occurred and provided a distinctive perspective on this research through the combination of their academic expertise and personal insights.

Although the empirical evidence comes from an example in higher education, broader implications of this research can be extracted for organizational theory and for practitioners. This case study provides a number of theoretical extensions and practical insights to successfully navigate crises on social media. Social media was one of the major catalysts for the release of information in the UVA crisis. By studying the released e-mails of subgroups of the BOV, the decision making and actions that ignited and fueled the crisis are brought to light. This rare look at the e-mails of a board illuminates how different domain expertise can impact the strategic direction of an institution, as well as how a board makes decisions when only a few people are driving the agenda on an issue (Proell, Thomas-Hunt, Sauer, & Burris, 2013). Furthermore, the traditional media mentions and subsequent social media posts regarding phrases and talking points used by key stakeholders to communicate around the crisis (e.g., strategic dynamism, incremental leadership) advance the understanding of how social media amplifies traditional media. Finally, leadership strategies are examined to highlight the distinction between incremental change and aggressive transformation in organizations, with a focus on the ramifications of these disparate approaches for social media. Ultimately, we illuminate the real-time power of Twitter: the ability to listen and learn as decisions are made, by monitoring reactions and directing the appropriate course of action.

2. Competing logics of leadership

At the core of the crisis was a philosophical difference about leadership between members of

the BOV and UVA President Teresa Sullivan. While the board valued leadership that was heroic, strategic, decisive, and dynamic, the president espoused ‘incrementalism.’ The rector and vice rector of the BOV were especially concerned with ‘strategic dynamism’—in particular, first-mover advantage regarding Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which were making headlines during the beginning of 2012. First-mover advantage is often critical in the industries of board members, such as real estate and hedge fund investing, and they considered MOOCs to be an existential threat. As one UVA dean stated in a June 10, 2012 message to his school’s faculty, the “rector called these [MOOCs] ‘existential threats,’ or challenges to the existence of the University. . . . The rector explained that the Board of Visitors seeks ‘bold, not incremental change’” (Aylor, 2012). This sense that “technology [was] coming at us” pervaded the mindset of the board, and, to them, required bold, decisive leadership. In contrast, the skepticism of bold, decisive leadership is apparent in Sullivan’s statement to the BOV on June 18, 2012 (“[President Sullivan’s Statement](#),” 2012):

I have been described as an incrementalist. It is true. Sweeping action may be gratifying and may create the aura of strong leadership, but its unintended consequences may lead to costs that are too high to bear. . . . Corporate-style, top-down leadership does not work in a great university. Sustained change with buy-in does work.

Teresa Sullivan, as a trained sociologist, comes from a discipline that views with skepticism the great man theory of leadership and sees social forces as a primary driver of change (Khurana, 2002; March, 1984). As described in the seminal studies of college presidents (e.g., Birnbaum, 1992; Cohen & March, 1974), Sullivan’s insight is consistent with history; however, it created a foundational rift between her and several members of the board.

In a study (Smerek, 2011) of newly hired college presidents, variation was found in *attitude of wisdom*: a balance of knowing and doubting (Meacham, 1983; Weick, 1998). An attitude of wisdom is distinguished by avoiding extremes: being too certain that you know everything that can be known or being so cautious that you cannot take decisive action because there is far too much to learn. By claiming that “corporate-style, top-down leadership does not work,” Sullivan seems to have been far on one extreme. As this article will demonstrate, she would have been better served in balancing both types of leadership: decisive and strategic—perhaps even symbolically—in some domains and incremental in

her approach to gaining buy-in from faculty on other initiatives.

3. Power plays

Initial actions of the rector, vice rector, and others on the BOV who called for the resignation of the president were predicated on the expectation that power rested at the top of a traditional hierarchy, whereby the board had ultimate control. Consequently, the BOV thought that creating a sense of urgency about UVA’s need for change—more specifically, strategic dynamism—would be sufficient to justify the ousting of President Sullivan. The BOV’s focus on protecting the demise or stagnation of UVA reflected a sense that stakeholders would lend their support if the board framed its actions as protecting the prestige or status of the university, essentially ‘saving’ the institution from peril. Such framing leveraged the propensity of individuals to buffer from losses even more than they seek gain or improvement (Pettit, Yong, & Spataro, 2010). The BOV, however, overestimated its power, and consequently the degree to which its actions would remain unopposed and unquestioned, believing that both the authority with which it was vested and its control over information would be sufficient to quell any questioning of its actions (French & Raven, 1959).

Furthermore, the BOV’s unilateral and veiled actions suggest that it assumed the board would remain the central hub of communication through dissemination of mass correspondence to stakeholders during the events. Thus, the BOV overlooked the possibility of decentralized and dyadic communication amongst stakeholders in which congruence or compatibility of a broader set of actors’ interests could be identified. The BOV entirely failed to anticipate that stakeholders would be motivated to communicate directly with others through emergent forms of communication such as Twitter, Facebook, and online petitions. In large part, the BOV expected that stakeholders would respect their authority and consider counter-action inappropriate (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). In particular, the BOV’s initial belief that it would derive power from control over information and access is evident in the rector’s statement: “Consistent with sound employment practices, it is the policy of the Board to keep confidential matters of disagreement and those relating to evaluation of progress against mutually agreed upon goals” (de Vise & Kumar, 2012).

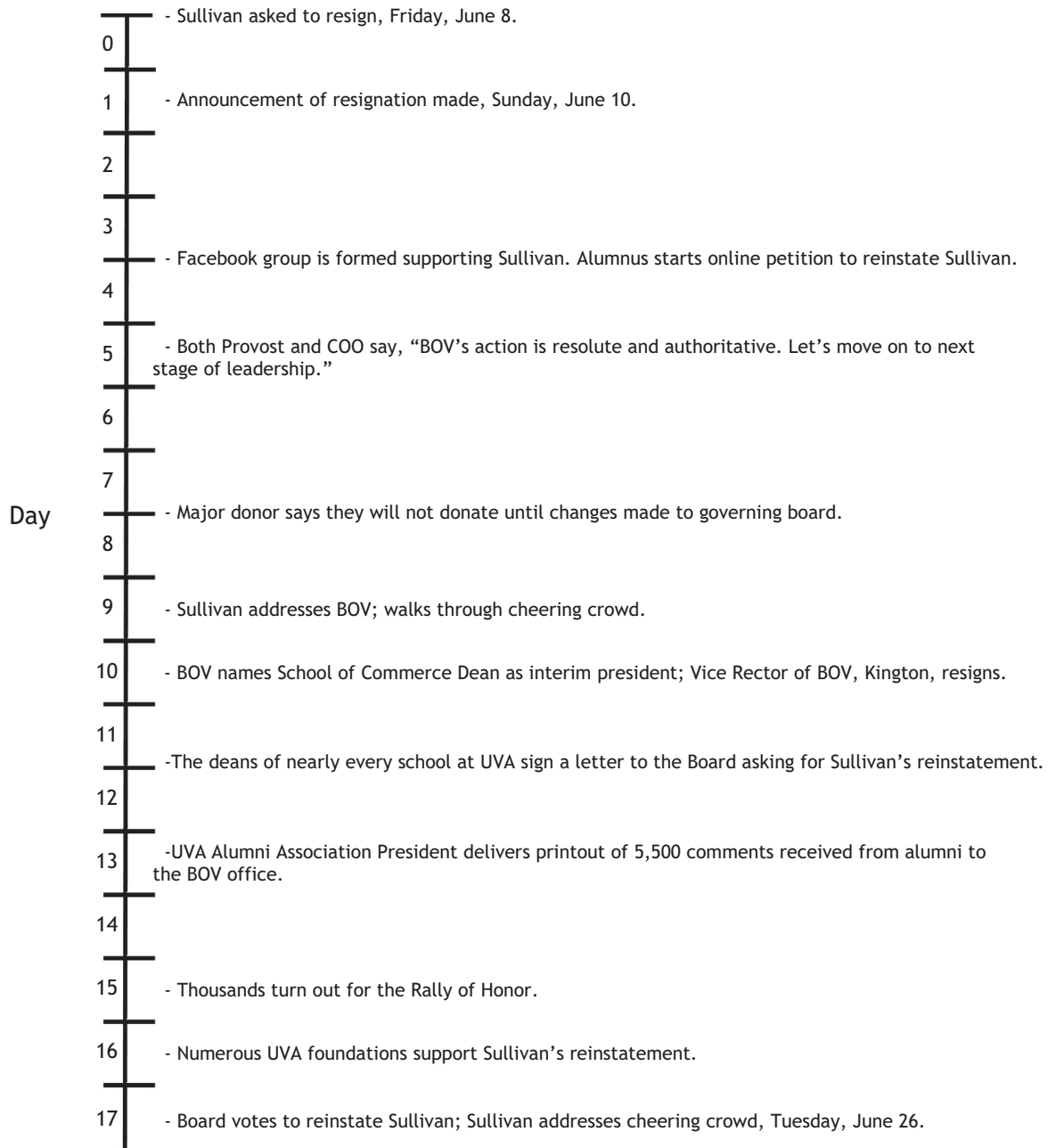
An opportunity to evaluate the e-mails between the BOV members and other key stakeholders allows for an analysis of leadership, power, and expertise.

What emerges from the e-mails from the rector is a very strong opinion about the need for fast change, despite there being no significant consultation with experts on higher education. Articles about online education and fixing fraught situations are circulated via e-mail to build the case for removing President Sullivan—and her incremental leadership style—and replacing her with somebody who espouses strategic dynamism. The aforementioned e-mails were both used to write news stories by the traditional media, and key excerpts were shared in real-time via social media. An analysis of the

timeline of events in this case shows that several key stakeholders who have expertise in how to lead the university were not consulted on this decision (Figure 1).

The UVA faculty was blindsided by the board's action, and the resignation sparked a series of protests by both the faculty senate and individual faculty members, including the resignation of a prominent long-term scholar in the computer science department. The faculty senate ultimately declared a lack of confidence in the board and stood behind President Sullivan during the crisis. These

Figure 1. A timeline of the crisis at the University of Virginia



protests added sparks to the fire that was growing on campus and simultaneously on social media.

In contrast with the authoritarian or hierarchical control asserted by the BOV, the president's 2-year tenure demonstrated her inclusive and egalitarian leadership style: she was frequently seen walking amongst students, introducing herself as "Terry," and fostering the belief that she cared about the interests of students, alumni, faculty, and staff. Despite few attempts to wield authority, she had amassed considerable power based on the respect her academic career engendered with faculty, her accessibility, and her continued communication about understanding the values of students and alums (Carter & Linkins, 2012). Failure to appreciate the reputational power possessed by President Sullivan, affectionately nicknamed "Sully," led the BOV to misperceive that key stakeholders would not challenge its actions. In part, the BOV, an outsider in the faculty realm, misread faculty members' complaints about their salaries to the BOV as lack of support for the president (Rice, 2012).

Although the sole power to appoint BOV members rests with the governor—in this case, one who was disinclined to intervene—power was actually more distributed than the BOV calculated. A seeming breach of process led stakeholders to realize that their own viability was at stake if the president could be removed in such a manner. This created unusual allies, who recognized that they had more to lose from standing alone than from uniting. The student council also expressed its discontent with the lack of transparency and the absence of members' voices in the decision-making process. UVA alumni communicated similar disapproval, to the extent that they created an online repository for alums to share their opinions; servers supporting it crashed due to heavy volume of activity. Various others condemned the process enacted by the board in making this critical decision, including a major donor, the Honor Committee, and the American Association of University Professors (Figure 1).

However, it was not just these important stakeholders expressing their anger that led to the eventual return of Teresa Sullivan. A Facebook group was formed on June 13, 2012—Students, Family, and Friends United to Reinstate President Sullivan—to rally constituents; an online petition was created to support Sullivan; YouTube videos were created to engage the community; and thousands of messages were sent on Twitter. Not only did the different stakeholders have an opportunity to voice their concerns, but also these sentiments were amplified by social media platforms. Multiple stakeholders, separately and together, chose to speak out in the hope of creating a better outcome for the university

(Detert, Burris, Harrison, & Martin, 2013). Not surprisingly, those stakeholders with the least ability to be punished expressed the most outrage: alums, students, and faculty. Staff members, who are at-will hires, were present but less vocal in expressing their dissent with the BOV's actions; those that did convey their disapproval chose less challenging forms of protest in order to mitigate negative assessments and actions that could have been directed toward them (Burris, 2012).

4. The power of social media

One of the key drivers of the events that occurred at UVA was social media; in fact, the university's alumni magazine summarized things with an online article titled "How social media helped change university history." This title depicts just how vitally important social media has become in organizing and sharing information. Scholars have considered how the impact of technology has shifted some of the traditional media gatekeepers (Hirsch & Gruber, *in press*), a shift that has been quite visible with flattened access enabling individuals to share news and information in real time.

The power of social media in the UVA chain of events was also evidenced by individuals' ability to join informal groups and vigorously support organizations publicly. Several groups were created on Facebook by various university stakeholders, enabling their mobilization. These groups became rallying points for sharing updates on the unfolding events, as well as for making plans to have public demonstrations to support the president and to protest actions taken by the BOV. Ten years before the crisis, an e-mail listserv perhaps would have been created or an extant one used to share information, but it would not have been as fluid and powerful as the social media groups that arose in the midst of the crisis at UVA. The ability to share images, videos, reactions, and other in-the-moment cues led to significant momentum and action, in part because they had huge implications for UVA's reputation.

As the posts and groups on Facebook gained momentum and as tweets flooded in on Twitter, the crisis reached a social media fever pitch. Many organizations have blind spots when it comes to their reputation, and threats that can be more easily and more quickly exposed via social media—as was the case at UVA. Organizational scholars have investigated how organizations respond to consumer boycotts in terms of both their reputation and impression management (McDonnell & King, 2013). A key finding of this research centers on the severity

of a threat to a firm's reputation in determining the nature of its response to a situation. The greater the severity, the bigger the need for a response that aligns with the core of an organization's reputation. Thus, the power of social media is an important force to be recognized, both by scholars and practitioners, as it can have a huge negative or positive impact on an organization's reputation.

5. Twitter as a source of real-time news

Twitter has become a real-time global newswire for individuals and organizations; its use has proliferated due to the technology's social and instantaneous nature. Despite the space limitations imposed by 140 characters, users can include links to more detailed information, as well as photos and videos. Twitter's influence can be seen in areas ranging from politics to sports to entertainment. Management scholars have articulated the many ways that organizations are using Twitter to share information and to interact with stakeholders. Twitter's power as a source of real-time news was apparent during the UVA events, which underscores the importance for scholars and practitioners to understand more about this burgeoning social media platform.

The flat hierarchy and ease of use of Twitter allows for information to travel faster via Twitter than other traditional media channels because there is no real filter. Scholars have considered how organizations give sense and make sense about events in their environment (see [Cornelissen, 2012](#); [Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991](#); [Weick, 1995](#)). However, the manner in which information is shared and what constitutes the environment has become increasingly dynamic in the social media ecosystem in which organizations operate today. This is evident regarding the UVA case based on the volume of different individuals and organizations that engaged in conversation around the unfolding events. Traditional news media companies were motivated to cover the story given the local and national implications; however, one of the most powerful sources of real-time news was the Twitter account of the campus student newspaper. As the staff uncovered additional information, they were able to share it via Twitter and have their reporting amplified as it was read by followers and forwarded on via retweets.

Given the massive volume of information on Twitter, one way to sort/categorize topics is by coding individual Twitter messages (tweets) with hashtags. Hashtags help Twitter users more easily find information related to a topic and contribute to the ongoing discussion around that area of interest.

For some events, there is an explicit sharing of what hashtag is to be used by those who want their messages to contribute to the ongoing conversation. In other, more impromptu situations and crises, hashtags emerge from the users who are paying attention to a certain topic. In the case of UVA, the hashtags #UVA and #BOV became trending topics on Twitter during some of the most important events of the crisis. Trending topics are those that generate the largest volume of tweets and are displayed prominently within the Twitter user interface, thus garnering even more attention. These trending topics allow for anybody to follow the events, join the conversation, and fuel greater interest in the story by the traditional news media. The UVA hashtag was commonly used by various university stakeholders to talk about events prior to the crisis, but the BOV hashtag was not: it became a shorthand way to refer to the board during the crisis. The dual popularity of the hashtags highlighted just how much attention was being paid to the board and its decisions and actions during the time of the crisis. Prior to the sequence of events, the Twitter discussion was focused solely on the university and not the board.

6. Social media's role in the transparency of information

The moral outrage over the firing of Teresa Sullivan is an intriguing feature of this case; people did not like the process itself and the lack of transparency. Being a governing board of a university is more akin to running a city ([Kerr, 2001](#)) than being a board of a corporation in for-profit markets, where competitive forces often make secrecy a high priority. Employees of for-profit corporations do not expect transparency to the same degree as those working for a public university. The stakeholders of a university—students, faculty, staff, and alumni—are also freer to voice their concerns with fewer possible ramifications. In the UVA case, there was a confluence of people who freely had a voice because of social media and who expected more transparency. In contrast, the context in which most of the UVA board members operate during their full-time jobs (i.e., within business organizations) requires quick decisions and bears a low burden of real-time transparency.

In the UVA case, the full board never deliberated as a group; at least three of the 16 board members reported having no idea Sullivan's resignation was coming ([de Vise & Kumar, 2012](#)). Given the nature of decision making in university administration, where at times there is little formal authority, the process

used to make decisions is critical (Cohen & March, 1974). Researchers of procedural justice have shown that while the outcome is important to people, the process that was used to reach the outcome can be just as important (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996). People may not like the outcome of a decision, but if they agree that the process used to reach the outcome was fair, they will accept it with relative equanimity. This was not the case at UVA. Although devising a fair process to fire an executive is difficult under the best circumstances, in the UVA case, perceived transparency was extraordinarily low and exacerbated the crisis. This led to many stakeholders taking to social media, where they knew they would be heard loud and clear.

7. Role of leaders in a crisis

In a unanimous vote by the Board of Visitors, Teresa Sullivan was elected as the eighth—and first female—president of the University of Virginia in January 2010; she assumed office that August. Prior to UVA, Sullivan had a storied career ascending through a variety of faculty and administrative appointments at other top public universities including the University of Texas and the University of Michigan. Upon her selection, she succeeded prior president John T. Casteen III, who had been a respected leader of UVA for 20 years. Given this backdrop, it is perhaps no surprise that 2 years into a 5-year contract the backlash following her resignation and controversy with the BOV was so pronounced. Effective leadership by the president and BOV was expected from one of the nation's most prestigious public institutions, and the publicity associated with the crisis was unsettling for all stakeholders involved.

The significance of leadership on outcomes such as organizational performance has long been debated academically. Whereas some (e.g., Gupta, 1986; Tichy & Devanna, 1986) have argued that effective leadership is a relevant precondition of high performance and can explain as much as 45% of an organization's performance (Day & Lord, 1988), others (e.g., Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985) have suggested that leadership may be less consequential to organizational success. There seems to be less debate, however, on whether leadership matters in times of crisis. One study found that behaviors associated with leadership—such as articulating a mission and vision, showing determination, and communicating high performance expectations—predicted firm performance under conditions of uncertainty and threat but not under conditions of certainty (Waldman, Ramirez, House, & Puranam, 2001). Since crises are defined in large part by

uncertainty, research examining leadership in uncertain times seems particularly germane to organizational crises.

The situation at UVA produced a shroud of uncertainty, and the corresponding negative attention by both mainstream and social media outlets yielded a crisis-like environment at the university. The need to not only effectively manage the crisis but also to demonstrate leadership throughout the turmoil was evident. Typically, crisis management involves a series of activities that center primarily on damage control whereby a leader or designated crisis handler engages in communication and a deliberate set of actions aimed at limiting reputational, financial, and other threats to the organization (James & Wooten, 2010). Often, external resources are brought to bear in order to facilitate damage control. This was true for the BOV: it eventually contracted with a prominent public relations (PR) firm to manage its messaging. However, by the time the BOV consulted the PR firm, stakeholder demonstrations and backlash in reaction to the BOV's deeds and communications were overwhelming. The reach and speed of social media made it virtually impossible for more mainstream communication tactics, such as press conferences, to compete and be as influential.

Whereas crisis management activity is largely reactive in nature, crisis leadership purports a more proactive stance and highlights a set of behaviors intended to positively influence multiple stakeholders (James & Wooten, 2005). A number of competencies have been identified as being necessary during a crisis. Sensemaking and resilience are particularly germane to the UVA crisis. *Sensemaking* is the attempt to create order, retrospectively, of what has occurred. It is driven by a desire to make things seem rational to ourselves and to others (Weick, 1993). To do so generally requires a context for understanding what has happened—a context by which judgments and decisions are made. Yet as crises are often unfamiliar events for which individuals and organizations have no context, sensemaking becomes more difficult, and judgment and decision making can be impaired as a result.

The experiences of the rector and the BOV members in industry were sufficiently distinct from the academic context. They had no frame of reference for making sense of the adverse reaction displayed by UVA stakeholders to what the board had likely assumed was a reasonable action in light of the looming external threat online education posed to the university. Thus, the BOV's lack of familiarity with academic politics and cultural norms made sensemaking nearly impossible. Contrast this with the extraordinary knowledge and history that the UVA faculty and President Sullivan had for operating

in an academic environment. By nature and training, academics are expected to question and analyze data. To the faculty, students, and others in the academic community, the BOV's actions were simply data to be scrutinized; and once analyzed, conclusions could be drawn that facilitated sensemaking and subsequent actions taken. This contingent used social media as an outlet for sensemaking and for clearly and concisely communicating their desires and expectations, behaviors generally associated with leadership (Waldman et al., 2001).

In addition to sensemaking, effective crisis handling—or crisis leadership—is also characterized by the ability to be resilient in a crisis. In psychological terms, *resilience* refers to a particular characteristic that portrays an individual as sturdy, resourceful, and flexible in the face of uncertainty or threat (Luther, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). In organizational research, resilience is characterized as adaptability (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). For both the individual and the organization to be deemed resilient, they must demonstrate a capacity to recover from a downturn. Because of the emotional toll that crises can take, resiliency is effortful; to demonstrate resilience time and again in the course of a crisis is noteworthy.

President Sullivan and her supporters demonstrated resilience throughout the UVA crisis. Despite negative attention and damage done to the university's reputation by the scandal, Sullivan and allies seemed to gain energy as the crisis unfolded. One could argue that social media use served not only as an outlet of cathartic release for this group, but also led to a groundswell of support that reinforced and further energized their efforts. Conversely, the relative absence of the use of social media by the BOV, the governor, and others supporting the ouster made it more difficult to garner a base of support in a timely enough fashion to keep pace with what was trending on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. It is reasonable to conclude that the BOV's momentum diminished over time while the momentum for Sullivan increased, creating a context that allowed her and her supporters to be more resilient throughout the crisis.

8. Conclusion

There are several takeaway lessons from this study of the real-time power of Twitter and its implications for crisis management and leadership in the age of social media (Table 1). The UVA case illustrates how critical it is to be present, to listen, and to engage everywhere stakeholders are talking about your organization. The myriad social media

Table 1. Practical tips for crisis management and leadership on social media

Be present, listen, and engage everywhere stakeholders are talking about your organization.
Develop strategic social media plans before a crisis hits.
Develop a local and national or international social media presence.
Develop transparent social media communications before, during, and after a crisis.
Use the power of 140 character tweets—amplify codes, photos, and retweets.
Know key social media voices/influencers amongst your stakeholders.

platforms that are being used in today's business environment offer touchpoints for leaders and organizations to engage in meaningful discourse and real-time sensemaking. There was a large disconnect in the UVA case between where board decision making was taking place and where much of the university community (e.g., students, alumni) was talking about those decisions. This gap grew larger as the crisis evolved and more people joined in the online conversation, yet the board continued to make decisions behind closed doors.

There is another key lesson to be learned from this case: Ensure that the top executive's leadership style and the board of directors' desired leadership style are aligned. Although the BOV likely knew Sullivan's leadership style when she was hired, its patience with her incremental approach seemed to dissolve quickly. The board's urgent call for strategic dynamism also became a rallying cry of sorts for stakeholders, who believed that this quick change so desired by the board perfectly embodied the mindset of a corporation more than that of a university. This disconnect around leadership style became both a catalyst for the crisis and something that exacerbated it.

The case study exemplifies how social media can turn a local event into a national or global story. The UVA student newspaper, *The Cavalier Daily*, was a powerful source of information as the crisis unfolded. News from *The Cavalier Daily* was shared widely on social media around the country and throughout the world. This sharing of stories and the ability of university stakeholders to stay well-informed about the crisis, regardless of where they lived, added pressure on the BOV to take action. Additionally, local and national news publications started to report on the events, given the broader consequences for higher education. It was not only stakeholders on campus that were scrutinizing the board's moves, but also those who cared about the university from afar.

One of the surprising findings of the events at UVA is that a self-inflicted crisis can be even more of an existential threat than one from outside the organization. The BOV was very concerned about the potential impact of online education on UVA and the university's role in it. These concerns were highlighted by the rector calling for the need to bring in new leadership and to act quickly to address these issues. The manner in which the change was enacted—with the surprise resignation of President Sullivan—led to the creation of an even larger crisis for UVA than the set of issues it faced before the presidential transition.

The unexpected resolution of the UVA crisis by the BOV (i.e., reinstatement of Teresa Sullivan as president) emphasizes that organizations can consider lighting an escape fire when a crisis appears to be out of control. Weick's (1993) seminal article on sensemaking introduced the idea of lighting a fire within a fire to escape the danger. This strategy can be effective in different contexts in which things appear to be out of control and the set of viable alternatives seems finite. Despite the dire nature of the situation as the crisis grew at UVA, the university was able to move forward from the June 2012 events in a surprisingly strong manner. Reversing course, whereby the university essentially ran into the fire, put it out: a helpful tactic for crisis management, leadership, and the reclamation of power in the age of social media.

References

- Alexander, R. M., & Gentry, J. K. (2014). Using social media to report financial results. *Business Horizons*, 57(2), 161–167.
- Aylor, J. (2012, June 10). *Email from Engineering Dean James Aylor*. Available at <http://www.virginia.edu/presidential-transition/120610aylor.html>
- Birnbaum, R. (1992). *How academic leadership works: Understanding success and failure in the college presidency* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Brockner, J., & Wiesenfeld, B. M. (1996). An integrative framework for explaining reactions to decisions: Interactive effects of outcomes and procedures. *Psychological Bulletin*, 120(2), 189–208.
- Burris, E. R. (2012). The risks and rewards of speaking up: Managerial responses to employee voice. *Academy of Management Journal*, 55(4), 851–875.
- Carter, Z., & Linkins, J. (2012, June 24). UVA Teresa Sullivan ouster reveals corporate control of public education. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/24/uva-teresa-sullivan-ouster-_n_1619261.html
- Cohen, M. D., & March, J. G. (1974). *Leadership and ambiguity: The American college president*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Cornelissen, J. P. (2012). Sensemaking under pressure: The influence of professional roles and social accountability on the creation of sense. *Organization Science*, 23(1), 118–137.
- Day, D. V., & Lord, R. G. (1988). Executive leadership and organizational performance: Suggestions for a new theory and methodology. *Journal of Management*, 14(3), 453–464.
- Detert, J. R., Burris, E. R., Harrison, D. A., & Martin, S. R. (2013). Voice flows to and around leaders understanding when units are helped or hurt by employee voice. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 58(4), 624–668.
- de Vise, D., & Kumar, A. (2012, June 13). Teresa Sullivan ouster: 33 faculty leaders protest her dismissal from University of Virginia presidency. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/college-inc/post/33-faculty-leaders-oppose-teresa-sullivan-ouster/2012/06/13/gJQAE4CSaV_blog.html
- French, J. R., Jr., & Raven, B. (1959). The bases of social power. In D. Cartwright (Ed.), *Studies in social power* (pp. 150–167). Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research.
- Gioia, D. A., & Chittipeddi, K. (1991). Sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change initiation. *Strategic Management Journal*, 12(6), 433–448.
- Gupta, A. K. (1986). Matching managers to strategies: Point and counter point. *Human Resources Management*, 25(2), 215–234.
- Hirsch, P. M., & Gruber, D. A. (in press). Digitizing fads and fashions: Disintermediation and globalized markets in creative industries. In C. Jones, M. Lorenzen, & J. D. Sapsed (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of creative and cultural industries*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199603510.013.013>
- James, E. H., & Wooten, L. P. (2005). Leadership as (un)usual: How to display competence in times of crisis. *Organizational Dynamics*, 34(2), 141–152.
- James, E. H., & Wooten, L. P. (2010). *Leading under pressure: From surviving to thriving before, during, and after a crisis*. New York: Routledge (p. 17).
- James, E. H., Wooten, L. P., & Dushek, K. (2011). Crisis management: Informing a new leadership research agenda. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 5(1), 455–493.
- Jost, J. T., Banaji, M. R., & Nosek, B. A. (2004). A decade of system justification theory: Accumulated evidence of conscious and unconscious bolstering of the status quo. *Political Psychology*, 25(6), 881–919.
- Kerr, C. (2001). *The uses of the university*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Khurana, R. (2002). *Searching for a corporate savior: The irrational quest for charismatic CEOs*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kietzmann, J. H., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I. P., & Silvestre, B. S. (2011). Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media. *Business Horizons*, 54(3), 241–251.
- Luther, S. S., Cicchetti, D., & Becker, B. (2000). The construct of resilience: A critical evaluation and guidelines for future work. *Child Development*, 71(3), 543–562.
- March, J. G. (1984). How we talk and how we act: Administrative theory and administrative life. In T. J. Sergiovanni & J. E. Corbolly (Eds.), *Leadership and organizational culture* (pp. 18–35). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- McDonnell, M.-H., & King, B. (2013). Keeping up appearances: Reputational threat and impression management after social movement boycotts. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 58(3), 387–419.
- Meacham, J. A. (1983). Wisdom and the context of knowledge: Knowing that one doesn't. In D. Kuhn & J. A. Meacham (Eds.), *On the development of development psychology*. Basel, Switzerland: Karger.
- Meindl, J., Ehrlich, S., & Dukerich, J. (1985). The romance of leadership. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 30(1), 78–102.

- Pettit, N. C., Yong, K., & Spataro, S. E. (2010). *Holding your place: Reactions to the prospect of status gains and losses*. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *46*(2), 396–401.
- President Sullivan's statement to the Board of Visitors. (2012, June 18). *Cavalier Daily*. Retrieved from <http://www.cavalierdaily.com/article/2012/06/president-sullivans-statement-to-the-board-of-visitors/>
- Proell, C., Thomas-Hunt, M. C., Sauer, S. J., & Burris, E. R. (2013). *Taking the lead: The effects of power distribution on information sharing and team performance*. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2273119>
- Rice, A. (2012, September 11). Anatomy of a campus coup. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/16/magazine/teresa-sullivan-uva-ouster.html?pagewanted=all&module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Ar>
- Smerek, R. (2011). *Sensemaking and sensegiving: An exploratory study of the simultaneous "being and learning" of new college and university presidents*. *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, *18*(1), 80–94.
- Sutcliffe, K. M., & Vogus, T. J. (2003). *Organizing for resilience*. In K. S. Cameron, J. E. Dutton, & R. E. Quinn (Eds.), *Positive organizational scholarship* (pp. 94–110). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Tichy, N., & Devanna, M. A. (1986). *The transformational leader*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Waldman, D. A., Ramirez, G. G., House, R. J., & Puranam, P. (2001). *Does leadership matter? CEO leadership attributes and profitability under conditions of perceived environmental uncertainty*. *Academy of Management*, *44*(1), 134–143.
- Weick, K. E. (1993). *The collapse of sensemaking in organizations: The Mann Gulch disaster*. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *38*(4), 628–652.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations* (Vol. 3). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Weick, K. E. (1998). *The attitude of wisdom: Ambivalence as the optimal compromise*. In S. Srivastra & D. L. Cooperrider (Eds.), *Organizational wisdom and executive courage*. San Francisco: Lexington.