

# Are we seeing more media crises?

This week featured two highly publicized and far-reaching media crises. One was the United Airlines situation, where a passenger was forcibly removed (and hurt in the process) from the plane, after he had been seated and had not agreed to “voluntarily” leave the aircraft. And the other involved White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer, who clumsily compared Syria’s Bashar al-Assad to Adolf Hitler, and then showed great ignorance about just what Hitler did during World War II.

## Twitter outrage

I saw both these situations unfold on social media (specifically, Twitter), and was able to add my observations to many others, both using hashtags and Twitter handles. Social media outrage appears to have caused both United and Sean Spicer to apologize profusely for their mistakes. In today’s *Washington Post*, Kathleen Parker argues that in the United case, the Twitter outrage (or “mob” as she calls it) was able to bring the situation to light and make change happen.

It seems that we have more media crises these days than before—but like Parker argues, what has changed is the ability to get these situations in front of more people, more quickly, through social media. So, in fact, we may not be having more crises, but rather more exposure for and to these crises.

## Changes...

It seems that United, and to some degree Sean Spicer, have still not adapted or recognized that the media landscape has changed dramatically. Anyone with internet access and a social media account can share their ideas, opinions, facts and more

damning, their video. Also, anyone with a smartphone has the ability to create video on the spot, and then share it immediately.

Ten years ago, if a passenger had been dragged off a plane, there would have been no record of it outside of the memories of the other passengers on the plane. Similarly, Sean Spicer's words would have received criticism later (if at all), not during his press briefing. Fewer people would've been exposed to these situations.

## More “eyeballs” available

Today's media crises are happening not because spokespeople and companies are screwing up more, but because more people are seeing it happen. It would behoove any public relations/communications practitioner to internalize that most everything can be publicized very quickly, and may even have incontrovertible visual proof with it.

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## Marketing        communications efforts        do        not        fix organizational problems

This morning, the Washington Post reports that Metro (the Washington Area Metropolitan Transit Authority or WMATA) is hiring two big public relations/communications firms

*“to help the transit agency rebuild its tattered image in the wake of a fatal Jan. 12 smoke incident.”*

The two agencies, O'Neill Associates and Hill + Knowlton

Strategies, are expert in crisis communications and will help develop a reputation management communications plan.

**The problem for Metro is that it has more than an image problem. It has an organizational problem.**

As anybody who lives in the Washington, D.C. area and who rides Metro knows, WMATA has frequent problems, including lengthy delays, broken car doors, broken escalators, and smoke-filled stations. Most of these problems do not result in fatalities, as did the January incident, but they do inconvenience hundreds of commuters every day.

WMATA has also experienced a drop in ridership in the past year (D.C. area sees fewer taking public transit). Although the article attributes this decline to lower gas prices, it is hard to imagine it doesn't have to do with the unreliable and expensive service that WMATA offers.

Most news reports about the January incident detail aspects of WMATA's organizational challenges. There's a lack of internal accountability (why weren't NTSB safety directives followed?) and a lack of cooperation with external parties (first responders did not know where the smoke-filled train was in the tunnel and their radios did not work underground).

It's beyond my knowledge to detail the workings of WMATA, but as a rider, I have seen countless examples of poor service. Track work (or "rebuilding" as it is now called) happens nearly every weekend, causing lengthy delays. And the cost is astronomical. At the highest end, a round-trip peak-hour commute costs nearly \$12.

Frustration with Metro does not have to do with its image. It has to do with the real, day-to-day interactions most riders have with the system. A crisis communication plan is always good to have (as an aside, several years ago I heard Metro's then public relations director say that the agency had a plan in case of terrorism on the system, *but not in case of*

*accidents).*

I hope that by hiring outside communications counsel, Metro is admitting it has a problem and that it is ready to seek for a solution. But the solution is not simply *to appear* to have stuff under control (create a positive image). **The real solution would be to address the organizational issues that underlie the image problem.**

What are your thoughts?

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## **More about reading; and thoughts about the Costa Concordia**

The last post here was about why writing skills might be in decline, and my assertion that it is because people are not reading enough. Today, Gini Dietrich writes in her Spin Sucks blog that reading fiction is beneficial to your career because, among other benefits, it helps fine-tune your social skills, especially your empathy.

So, in addition to helping you recognize good writing, expose you to new worlds, teach you new vocabulary and ways of seeing, reading can help you build better connections and be better at work.

Yet, reading alone will not result in a fabulous, well rounded writer/emotionally intelligent being. **You have to practice. You have to interact.** Someone whose nose is always in a book, and who never emerges to deal with the real world is probably not going to be very emotionally intelligent. Also, if you

never write and get edited, your writing is never going to improve.

The Costa Concordia, in case you haven't seen the news in the past two days, is a luxury Mediterranean cruise ship that ran aground near Italy, and sank, killing at least six people onboard. Last night, on the CBS News, it was reported that the crew did not initially inform the passengers appropriately about the impending disaster. They downplayed the danger, and that led to chaos. Some passengers took matters into their own hands.

It seems that people's first reaction to bad news is disbelief. They act as if nothing is wrong. Perhaps that's what happened to the Costa Concordia's crew. Unfortunately, this type of disbelief can lead to tragedy. There is also a desire to minimize problems.

This is why crisis communication training is so important. When crisis happens, reliable information is key. Denial and misinformation will make a bad situation worse.

Any thoughts? Please share in the comments.