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Social media and the court of public opinion

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Abstract: This case explores the impact of stakeholder opinion expressed through social media on organisational decision-making. Students will examine the nationally publicised coaching search conducted by the University of Tennessee's football program in the fall of 2017 through the lens of social influence theory. Chancellor Beverly Davenport of the University of Tennessee faced a dilemma when she offered the job of Head Football Coach to Ohio State's defensive coordinator. Fans immediately voiced their outrage concerning the candidate's character and ignited a social media firestorm, which quickly received national media attention. Chancellor Davenport had to decide just how much weight university administrators should allow public opinion to carry in the hiring decision.

Keywords: social media; social influence; ethical decision-making.

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This paper is a revised and expanded version of a paper entitled 'Fanning the firestorm: addressing stakeholder outrage on social media' presented at the Eastern Academy of Management Conference in Providence, Rhode Island, USA, 3 May 2018.

1 Introduction

The University of Tennessee Chancellor, Beverly Davenport, sighed as she scrolled through Twitter. Shocked by all the negativity and vitriol displayed on social media, she could not help but wonder if the public uproar about the hiring debacle adversely affecting the football program would become the new normal in college athletics and beyond. The online mobs of university stakeholders were running amok and obviously attempting to rebuff administrative decisions. Davenport and Athletic Director, John Currie, had been in steady communications as the debacle unfolded, and both were stunned by the terrible turn of events.

1.1 University of Tennessee football

Over the course of multiple family generations, University of Tennessee football has been woven into the cultural fabric across the Volunteer state. Over the past 20 plus years, the state has brought in professional sports teams with the Tennessee Titans, Memphis Grizzlies, Nashville Predators, and Nashville Soccer Club. Prior to that influx, the Volunteers served as the primary sports focus of the state for 100 years. Owning the spotlight allowed them to build an incredible fan legacy. Over 2,400 Tennessee-born babies were named 'Peyton' in the two decades following Volunteer legend and Southern cultural icon Peyton Manning's reign as the best-ever quarterback for the team (WBIR Staff, 2016).

The University of Tennessee football legacy has not been limited to feel-good family bonding moments, but has enabled an incredible economic impact as well. In August 2015, the UT Athletics Department hired and tasked Pennsylvania research firm Tripp Umbach to calculate the total economic impact of UT sports. In May 2016, the firm concluded that UT football has a \$355.7 million annual economic impact. The university boasted 20 sports, but football alone was found responsible for 57.5% of the total financial impact. Home football weekends in Knoxville have served as cultural events that spanned the entire weekend, furthering the financial impact. Each average home-game weekend accounted for \$42 million in economic impact. The largest slice of that economic pie has benefited the hospitality industry: hotels saw \$73.9 million while restaurants and bars brought in \$82.5 million (Gaines, 2017).

1.2 University announces intention to hire Greg Schiano as head coach

The University of Tennessee has fielded a football team for 131 years, and prior to the fall of 2017, the Volunteers had never lost eight games in a single season. Tennessee posted a paltry record of four wins and eight losses in 2017, and they were winless in SEC conference play. Against that backdrop, University Vice Chancellor Beverly Davenport and Director of Athletics John Currie were tasked with replacing fired football

coach Butch Jones with a new hire in November 2017. On Sunday, November 26th, Currie believed he had found his coach in Greg Schiano.

Schiano was on staff at Penn State in the early 1990s, coaching alongside convicted child sexual abuser Jerry Sandusky. Testimony released in 2016 implicated Schiano, as former Penn State staffer Mike McQueary testified that Tom Bradley, who was also on staff, told McQueary that Schiano knew of a specific instance of child abuse committed by Sandusky, but he failed to report the incident to authorities. Schiano and Bradley vehemently denied any knowledge of or being witness to any such abuses by Sandusky (Wilson, 2017).

The revolt against hiring Schiano was evident both online and on campus. Online outrage was immense on Twitter by fans and state representatives alike. ‘The head football coach at the University of Tennessee is the highest-paid state employee,’ Tennessee State Representative Jeremy Faison said. “They’re the face of our state. We do not need a man who has that type of potential reproach in their life as the highest-paid state employee. It’s egregious to the people and it’s wrong to the taxpayers” (Gilberg, 2017). Faison was joined on Twitter or via statement by other state politicians including Republican gubernatorial candidates Mae Beavers, Diane Black, Beth Harwell and Bill Lee, who also conveyed their displeasure to a Schiano hire. State Representative Eddie Smith voiced on Twitter, “A Greg Schiano hire would be anathema to all that our University and our community stand for” (Gilberg, 2017).

2 Media criticism

Fans, politicians, boosters, and former players fanned flames of controversy speaking out against the Schiano hire as the topic quickly reached trending status on Twitter. However, not all national media pundits believed the public expressions of outrage were warranted. Pat Forde of Yahoo Sports penned the following scathing rebuke the evening of November 26th:

As Yahoo Sports reported, the school was poised to hire Ohio State defensive coordinator Greg Schiano – the guy who achieved the impossible by making Rutgers respectable earlier this century. And then came the lynch mob trying to destroy the deal.

You people are ridiculous. Not all of you, but the delusional loudmouths who somehow think a program with a 62–63 record over the last decade is too good for Schiano. The internet vigilantes who want to bully their way into running the school’s coaching search. The piling-on politicians. The protesters. The rock painters. The rubes who are still waiting for Jon Gruden to slide down the chimney.

But the worst among the Tennessee lunatic fringe are the disingenuous liars who say this Schiano backlash is about Mike McQueary’s testimony regarding Jerry Sandusky and things that happened at Penn State, when in reality it’s because they don’t think Schiano is going to win a Southeastern Conference title. Don’t go getting righteously indignant when this has nothing to do with being righteous and everything to do with trying to beat Georgia (Forde, 2017)

Local Tennessee fans and other university stakeholders did not agree with Forde’s assessment, and Forde did not agree with how the situation was being handled. The convergence of an antsy fan base, a coach with a perceived checkered past, and the modern realities of social media yielded a result that could become a new normal in college athletics (Staples, 2017).

2.1 *Reaching a verdict*

Wanting to move forward from the ‘trial by social media’ in the court of public opinion, Chancellor Davenport was left wondering how the University of Tennessee should address the firestorm while still managing stakeholder input and expectations. Davenport thought back to her time of formal training during her PhD program in Organisational Communication at the University of Michigan and the more recent leadership development training seminars that she had attended regarding how to make decisions in a time of crisis. Realising she would not be able to please every stakeholder group, she knew she had to determine how much weight, if any, should be given to the popular opinion expressed by fans and stakeholders via social media as she and Currie worked together to make a final hiring decision.

3 Social media and the court of public opinion: teaching note

3.1 *Suggested audience*

This case is appropriate for university organisational behaviour, social media, public relations, and athletics administration courses. This case has a difficulty level appropriate for sophomore, junior, or senior-level undergraduate courses. The case can apply to a unit on organisational decision-making, social media firestorms, and/or public relations.

3.2 *Learning objectives*

The learner will be able to:

- Identify the three processes of social influence theory in this case.
- Develop a firestorm response plan based on the impact to various stakeholder groups.

4 Theoretical framework

4.1 *Social influence theory*

Social influence theory, as defined by Kelman, refers to the way an individual’s attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours are influenced by others through three processes: compliance, identification, and internalisation (Kelman, 1958). Compliance occurs when an individual adjusts their behaviour to gain rewards or avoid negative consequences, but they do not agree with or embrace the change internally. Identification occurs when an individual changes their behaviour to establish or change a relationship with another individual or group. Finally, internalisation occurs when an individual adjusts their behaviour because the behaviour aligns with both their desired rewards and their value system. In the digital era, social influence theory tends to inspire conformity online, as individuals in a network feel social pressure to conform to group norms to improve their sense of belonging.

Organisations have long been advised to make decisions that balance the interests and desires of their stakeholders with those of their bottom line. Davis explained that

consumers have a natural sense of a 'social contract' when interacting with an organisation or business (Davis, 2005). He stated, "This contract has obligations, opportunities and mutual advantage for both sides." In other words, organisations must fulfill the expectations of consumers on social issues when appropriate, or they can expect to suffer the consequences via their bottom line. Organisations must diligently scan for stakeholders' opinions to be expressed en masse during a time of crisis. As social influence theory outlines, individuals are susceptible to agreement with an opinion or criticism of an organisation if they see that agreement expressed in their network.

4.2 *The impact of social media*

In modern times, social media is a force that reaches more than 75% of the population in the USA, and has undeniably had an impact on how organisations communicate with their stakeholders (Greenwood et al., 2016). Social media has created a sort of power shift, changing relationships that have traditionally been considered a one-way street. For example, marketers have always used available channels to influence customers and potential customers, but social media affords the customers with an opportunity to interact with the organisations who are providing the influence (Davis, 2005). While this power shift has some distinct advantages for both customers and organisations, it has also opened up avenues of communication over which the organisation has little control. Discussions on social media can quickly turn negative, and the ease of which information is shared mean that any story can become a trending topic if enough consumers are interested in participating in the dialog.

Researchers have reported on the attraction of interested parties to social media discussions:

"It can be argued that the inherent structure of [social networks] facilitates not only the acquisition of information but also the discussion of its importance and relevance with other members of a particular individual's social network *in situ*, which may increase the elaboration and reflection mechanism for an individual to make sense of what they were informed about" (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2012).

These online social conversations are a large part of the shift consumers have experienced in the last decade as we have moved from the information age to the frequently mentioned 'participation age'. As Simon Mainwaring pointed out, "concerned consumers are realising that they can use social media to organise themselves around shared values to start effective movements" (Mainwaring, 2011). He highlighted newfound abilities of consumers to influence organisations to make positive changes in social responsibility and ethical behaviour, and the necessity of organisations proactively partnering with their followers on social media rather than trying to fend them off.

Researchers have reported that the extent to which consumers use social media platforms to keep up with public issues and information about their specific communities is positively related to social capital. In other words, followers of a specific organisation and/or event will be some of the most interested and involved parties in the happenings of that organisation. Involvement in social media discussions has a positive impact on citizens' participatory behaviours (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2012; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2017). An important consideration for organisations who find consumers rallying around a specific cause or issue is that consumers may feel more motivated to state their opinion on social media when others in their community do so, even if they did not originally

view the issue as one with personal meaning. As Susarla reported, ‘...social media amplifies the visibility of viral phenomenon by turning more individuals into opinion makers as they easily engage with others like them’ (Sussarla, 2017).

4.3 Firestorms

So, what can organisations do to gain control during situations in which they become the centre of a *negative* discussion from their followers on social media platforms? In the last decade, researchers and public relations professionals have suggested and refined several best practices for companies that find themselves in a rising social media firestorm, or rampant, fast-spreading backlash expressed online by followers.

Klaassen suggested a four-part plan which involves organisations becoming familiar with their stakeholders’ social media habits, having a plan to be able to engage with the crowd in response when necessary, looking for changes in the social conversation about the organisation, and digging deeper into the real issue that stakeholders are passionately refuting (Klaassen, 2009). Other researchers have found that updating Twitter pages frequently is critical for organisations to increase or maintain credibility regarding their social media presence. Updating pages too slowly can quickly reduce credibility with followers, especially in times of crisis (Westerman et al., 2014).

Marketing professionals and academics alike have developed response mechanisms and prevention techniques that will undoubtedly continue to be refined as years pass and more firestorms rage on, providing cases for study. CEL Marketing and Public Relations firm recommended responding to social media crises as soon as possible in a clear, concise, and honest manner, and to apologise when necessary. They also suggested preventing crises by avoiding unnecessary and/or controversial topics as a whole and remaining consistent in your messages to your stakeholders (CEL Marketing, 2015). The Forbes Agency Council echoed these suggestions and added ‘getting ahead of the story’ as an important step to managing firestorms (Forbes Agency Council, 2017). The council recommends responding (and if needed, apologising) as soon as possible, even as the story is still developing – not after holding a meeting with your team to develop a strategy for handling the situation. They also suggested examining organisational culture, which involves the way both employees and customers are treated to look for the root cause of an uproar.

Other scholars and practitioners highlight the speed and volume of true social media firestorms and have determined Twitter to be the ‘fastest’ platform for such widespread information-sharing, especially in locally-connected network clusters. They provided suggestions for organisations that realise a firestorm is brewing, including continuous communication with stakeholders and issuing a public statement to a traditional media outlet. However, these researchers stress that becoming well-prepared to handle a firestorm should be a priority long before it happens, and that organisations can often ward off the (potentially long-term) negative effects by attracting a diverse followership online from the start. They concluded that organisations need to ‘...create fan networks, identify trusted information brokers to spread news about their company, and develop contingency plans for organising a collective social information response before they are needed in order to control the overall information picture’ (Pfeffer et al., 2014). Barnes and Lescault reported that only 33% of companies have a written social media plan, while only 27% maintain an online crisis management strategy (Barnes and Lescault, 2015).

Researchers have also developed a social norm theory on online firestorms, positing that the ‘stunning waves of aggression typical for online firestorms can be explained by the characteristic features of social media that ideally contribute to the solution of the second-order public good dilemma of norm enforcement’ (Rost et al., 2016). This theory supports the idea that consumers often feel the need to join a firestorm conversation due to a desire to agree with what they believe to be a positive social norm or to voice their concern over an action that violates a social norm. These researchers also highlighted that online anonymity does not increase online aggression during firestorms supporting social norms, because consumers often want their names associated with promoting positive social norms. Similarly, other researchers concluded that a desire for social recognition is the strongest factor in consumers’ likelihood of participating in an online firestorm. The perceived social support that they receive from like-minded individuals expressing similar opinions validates their feelings and further encourages them to join the conversation (Johnen et al., 2017).

The past decade has provided no shortage of public relations flubs-turned-firestorms. In January 2017, Uber felt backlash from customers after the company tweeted their decision to not enforce price surges during the New York City taxi-driver strike, which was sparked by Donald Trump’s newly created travel ban, which prevented immigrants from several Muslim countries from entering the USA. The organisation’s decision was seen by many as supportive of Trump’s controversial travel ban (since many of the taxi drivers on strike were immigrants from Muslim countries), and inspired thousands of consumers to tweet their intention to start using Lyft instead of Uber (Hutson, 2017). In April 2017, a video of a passenger being forcibly removed from their overbooked United Airlines flight quickly went viral, and resulted in a full refund for all passengers aboard the flight, a drop in stock price, and a change in overbooking policy from several airlines. ‘Incidents that not so long ago would have been relatively isolated are inflaming public sentiment at a breathtaking pace, catching companies wrong-footed and significantly raising the stakes of such missteps’ (Sussarla, 2017).

5 Pedagogy

5.1 Methodology #1

After reading the case and theory notes on social influence theory and the impact of social media in class or prior to class, have students count off to divide them into five groups. Each group should represent a different relevant stakeholder in the hiring process, including university administrators, students, the football team, fans, and donors. Give each group 30 minutes to discuss the events and make a recommendation on how the administration should move forward from the stance of the stakeholder group they represent. To prompt topical discussion and reach a decision, student groups should answer the following questions:

- If Schiano is hired, how will our stakeholder group be affected? List potential positive and negative consequences. Consequences can relate to team performance, university/team reputation and public relations, and increased or decreased revenue for the team/university.

- If Schiano is not hired, how will our stakeholder group be affected? List potential positive and negative consequences. Consequences can relate to team performance, university/team reputation and public relations, and increased or decreased revenue for the team/university.
- How much (if any) influence should we allow the opinions of the other stakeholder groups to have in our decision-making process?
- How much influence (if any) does the social media firestorm have on our recommendation? Why?
- What is the recommendation to administration from our group?
- Identify how others (or consideration for others) affected our group's decision. How did our group experience compliance, identification, and/or internalisation during this decision-making process?

Following the 30-minute group discussions, all five groups should briefly share their recommendations (and rationale for those recommendations) with the class. The instructor should keep a record of how many groups recommend proceeding with the Schiano hire and how many recommend terminating the hire. To debrief students following this exercise, utilise a jigsaw approach by placing them into new groups that contain representation from each of the five stakeholder groups. Students should spend an additional 30 minutes in the new groups presenting their recommendations to each other and holding a structured discussion in which they identify and justify the differences and similarities between those recommendations. Students should be encouraged to summarise the points of agreement and disagreement between stakeholder groups and share how others (or consideration for others) affected their group's decision. Discuss similarities and differences between how each group experienced compliance, identification, and/or internalisation during this decision-making process.

5.2 Methodology #2

Prior to covering the case, instructors could ask students to read the theory notes on social media firestorms. Allow students (individually or in groups) to search for tweets from firestorms on Twitter for examples of stakeholder comments about and/or directed toward various organisations in times of stress or crisis. Students do not need a personal Twitter account to complete this exercise. To search for these tweets, students should select the 'Search' feature on the Twitter homepage, and type the hashtag into the search field. This will populate a list of the most popular tweets that used the hashtag. The instructor can provide examples of past firestorms for the students to explore. Some ideas include:

- #StarbucksBathroom: This hashtag will curate tweets about Starbucks' bathroom policy for customers. A social media firestorm ignited in the aftermath of the arrest of two African-American men who were denied access to the bathroom while waiting to begin a business meeting at a location in Philadelphia.

- **#UnitedAirlinesAbuse:** This hashtag will curate tweets about the 69-year-old medical doctor who was forcibly removed from an airplane prior to take-off, after the airline over-booked the flight. The video of the incident went viral and ignited a social media firestorm for the airline.
- **#BrianWilliamsMisremembers:** This hashtag will curate tweets about the news anchor who claimed to be in an aircraft that came under fire while covering the war in Iraq in 2003. When the pilot of the aircraft spoke out to say that Williams was not present at the time, Williams claimed that he had ‘misremembered’ the facts, spurring a social media firestorm.

Let students scroll through relevant tweets for 10–15 minutes, and then use the next 30 minutes to create a plan for how the organisation should address the firestorm. The following guiding questions can help shape this activity for students:

- Students should identify and summarise at least fifteen relevant tweets on the topic selected.
- Students should categorise the tweets into stakeholder groups based on the perceived voice/opinion of the sender (current customers, potential customers, competitors, company employees, company leaders, shareholders, or social activists). What patterns/themes are present with regards to the stakeholders? (e.g., Are current customers supportive or upset about the perceived mistake(s) that were made? Are company leaders supportive or apologising for the perceived mistake(s) that were made?)
- Students should think through and articulate the consequences of how each relevant stakeholder group may be affected by the firestorm. List potential positive and negative consequences. Consequences can relate to organisational financial performance, reputation and public relations, and customer loyalty.
- In their analysis, students should draw on their knowledge gained from the literature about how to handle firestorms to make recommendations for a firestorm response action plan based on the impact to various stakeholder groups. Students should summarise their action plan in a two-page written assignment. To debrief this assignment, prompt students to research how the firestorm was handled by the company and identify differences in the plan they crafted and the company’s actions. Students can verbally share these findings in a 30-minute class discussion. Guide the discussion by asking students:
 - How did the company handle the firestorm? Were apologies issued, or was it ignored altogether?
 - Was any policy instituted to change organisational behaviour based on the incident that ignited the firestorm?
 - Did the firestorm blow over quickly, or were there long-term negative effects?
 - What have you learned about the importance of organisations maintaining a firestorm response plan?

5.3 Methodology #3

Prior to covering the case, instructors could ask students to read the theory notes on social media firestorms. Randomly assign students into groups of three to four. Instruct students to compare and contrast the social media firestorm outlined in the case study to one of the firestorms listed below:

- Starbucks went viral after a social media firestorm ignited in the aftermath of the arrest of two African-American men who were denied access to the bathroom while waiting to begin a business meeting at a location in Philadelphia.
- A 69-year-old medical doctor was forcibly removed from his United Airlines flight prior to take-off, after the airline over-booked the flight. The video of the incident went viral and ignited a social media firestorm for the airline after the flight attendants brutally dragged him down the aisle.
- News anchor Brian Williams claimed to be in an aircraft that came under fire while covering the war in Iraq in 2003. When the pilot of the aircraft spoke out to say that Williams was not present at the time, Williams claimed that he had ‘misremembered’ the facts, spurring a social media firestorm.

Instruct students to complete the following tasks to accomplish this assignment:

- Create a chart listing the University of Tennessee football coach hiring firestorm on the left and one of the firestorms above on the right.
- Compare the organisational responses to the firestorms overall and based on the impact to various stakeholder groups. Students should research the impact of the firestorm on the following:
 - Organisational financial performance
 - Organisational reputation
 - Organisational leaders
 - Customers (fans)
 - Shareholders (students)
 - Donors
 - Employees (football players)

Finally, students should make an overall assessment of whether the organisation responded to the firestorm appropriately, based on a comparison of actions related to each element of Klaassen’s four-part plan (as outlined in the theory notes on firestorms).

To debrief this assignment, students can verbally share the findings in their charts in a 30-minute class discussion. Guide the discussion by asking students:

- Which organisation crafted a more successful firestorm response plan based on the impact to various stakeholder groups?
- Did you get the impression that any stakeholder groups overshadowed others – or were left out completely - as organisational leaders crafted their response to the firestorm?

- What have you learned about the importance of organisations maintaining a firestorm response plan?

5.4 Methodology #4

Discussion questions and responses

- 1 Should the administrators proceed with hiring Schiano based on stakeholder feedback, or continue searching for another candidate? How much weight, if any, should be given to the popular opinion expressed by fans and stakeholders via social media affect the hiring decision? Support your answer with an explanation of how each relevant group of stakeholders would be affected by your decision.

“Answers will vary, but students should identify some of the following factors when supporting their answers: Stakeholders who are voicing their concerns online are some of the most involved and interested supporters of the university. Social media provides an efficient avenue for them to communicate their disapproval to the administrators, and their concerns should be addressed both via social media and a public press release via traditional media outlets.; Though social media firestorms are often short-lived, the impact of negative stakeholder opinions online can have long-lasting negative effects. Program supporters should be encouraged to share their feedback, and the claims should be fully investigated.; The university’s administration should lend a listening ear to the concerns voiced online and change their hiring decision accordingly. This should be accomplished in consultation with the university’s office of public relations.; If the university has an online crisis management strategy in place, it should be implemented swiftly. If not, one should be created as soon as possible”.

“Students can cite the social norm theory recently developed by Rost et al. (2016), which supports the idea that consumers often feel the need to join a firestorm conversation due to a desire to agree with what they believe to be a positive social norm or to voice their concern over an action that violates a social norm. If the firestorm were to be ignored, the negative effects would likely only increase. Additionally, students could support their responses by incorporating information related to social influence theory, as defined by Kelman (1958), which refers to the way an individual’s attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours are influenced by others through three processes: compliance, identification, and internalisation. Compliance occurs when an individual or organisation adjusts their behaviour to gain rewards or avoid negative consequences, but they do not agree with or embrace the change internally and Identification occurs when an individual or organisation changes their behaviour to establish or change a relationship with another individual or group. The university would be engaging in these processes (as the actions of university administrators influence the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of the various relevant stakeholders) if the administrators decided to retract the job offer and find a new candidate but not carry the process further or address any deeper underlying issues in their organisation. Internalisation occurs when an individual or organisation adjusts their behaviour because the behaviour aligns with both their desired rewards and their value system. This is the ideal process for the university to succeed long-term as they choose a new candidate and communicate their choice to their stakeholders. This would mitigate unwanted negative effects on the behaviours of stakeholders such as decreased support of the football program through decreases in donations to the program, game and event attendance, online followership, etc.”

- 2 How should the university address the social media firestorm ignited by the announcement of a controversial candidate for the position? What negative consequences are at stake if the university chooses a different strategy to address (or not address) the firestorm?

“Answers will vary, but students should identify some of the following factors when supporting their answers: The university should allow their office of public relations to work in close consultation with university administrators to carry out a proper response to the online firestorm.; University administrators should communicate with their stakeholders quickly and constantly for the duration of the firestorm so that they will be assured their message has been heard and is being considered.; The university should issue a statement to highlight their commitment to building a program of integrity”.

“Students could support their responses with information on Klaassen’s suggested four-part plan (2009) which involves organisations becoming familiar with their stakeholders’ social media habits, having a plan to be able to engage with the crowd in response when necessary, looking for changes in the social conversation about the organisation, and digging deeper into the real issue that stakeholders are passionately refuting. Additionally, any recommendations regarding quickly addressing the situation head-on can be supported by additional relevant research, such as Westerman et al.’s (2014) finding that updating Twitter pages frequently is critical for organisations to increase or maintain credibility regarding their social media presence, while updating pages too slowly can quickly reduce credibility with followers, especially in times of crisis. Recommendations for the creation of a social media crisis management plan can be supported by findings in the study from Pfeffer et al. (2014) that guide organisations to make a concerted effort to control the information that spreads through the firestorm”.

6 Epilogue

By the end of the day on November 26, 2017, the verbal agreement with former Rutgers and Tampa Bay Buccaneers head coach and then-current Ohio State defensive coordinator, Greg Schiano to become the new head football coach at the University of Tennessee had fallen apart due to strong and swift backlash from the fan base, local business owners, state representatives, and former Volunteer players. On Monday, November 27th, it was reported that Chancellor Beverly Davenport had not signed the memorandum of understanding between the university and Schiano, which called into question the legality of the document. In response to stakeholders who had expressed their outrage online, Davenport released the following statement that day, “I deeply regret the events of yesterday for everyone involved. The university remains steadfast in its commitment to excellence, and I look forward to John Currie continuing the search to bring the next head football coach to the University of Tennessee, Knoxville” (Ohm, 2017).

Currie also released a statement on the 27th in which he specified that the university had properly vetted Schiano regarding the Sandusky travesty. ‘Coach Schiano worked at Penn State from 1990–1995. Consequently, we, of course, carefully reviewed the 2012 investigation report by former Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Louis Freeh. Coach Schiano is not mentioned in the Freeh report and was not one of the more than 400 people interviewed in the investigation. We also confirmed that Coach Schiano was never

deposed and never asked to testify in any criminal or civil matter' (Ohm, 2017). Davenport, Currie, and the university put their faith in the Freeh report and their perceived due diligence and did not expect such swift backlash, which was aided and intensified by Twitter.

After the Schiano hiring was derailed, Currie continued to go after candidates such as Oklahoma State coach Mike Gundy, North Carolina State coach Dave Doeren, and Washington State coach Mike Leach, but he was ultimately placed on administrative leave by Chancellor Davenport as the coaching search was finalised. On December 1, 2017, just four days after releasing her statement about looking forward to supporting Currie as he continues the coaching search, Davenport officially suspended John Currie. He continued to receive his salary from December through February while negotiating a separation agreement with university administration. On March 22, 2018, the university announced that they agreed to pay Currie a severance of \$2,220,454.60. 'We wish John and his family well in their future endeavours,' Chancellor Davenport commented. "We are grateful for his contributions to the University of Tennessee, which began more than two decades ago." Currie had only been athletic director since April 1, 2017, after receiving a five-year contract (Rittenberg, 2018). Currie was immediately replaced by former Volunteers player, assistant coach, and national championship winning coach – Phillip Fulmer (Gilberg, 2017).

On December 7, 2017, Chancellor Davenport and the newly appointed Director of Athletics introduced Jeremy Pruitt as the new head football coach at the University of Tennessee. Pruitt previously served as defensive coordinator at the University of Alabama (UT Sports Press Release, 2017). After coaching the Vols for three seasons, Pruitt was fired for committing NCAA recruiting violations, costing the university over \$8 million in fines. Former head coach of University of Central Florida Josh Heupel was hired in 2021 (Bromberg, 2023). He led the team to seven wins in the 2021–2022 season and generated much excitement by going 11–2 in the 2022–2023 season. Those eleven wins were the most for the UT football program in a single season since 2001, and earned Heupel the Southeastern Conference Coach of the Year Award for 2022.

On December 27, 2017, Ohio State defensive coordinator Greg Schiano made his public remarks about his near-hiring fiasco at Tennessee, 'There will be a time,' Schiano said on Wednesday, according to an Associated Press report. "I really think there will be a time that it will be appropriate for me to speak about all of that. When I do, it will be good" (McClure, 2017).

On May 2, 2018, University of Tennessee President Joe DiPietro fired Beverly Davenport as Chancellor, and the letter he wrote to outline the reasons for her dismissal quickly went viral once it was released to the public. In his letter, DiPietro cited a lack of trust, collaboration, communication, and transparency from Davenport towards DiPietro and his leadership team. He stated that Davenport was unwilling to try to understand or acknowledge the value of the University of Tennessee system. He continued by excoriating her organisational skills, attention to details, and timely follow-up habits. DiPietro alluded to the football coaching debacle when he mentioned that he believed Davenport had 'failed to accept ultimate responsibility in some cases where subordinates make mistakes or errors...' (Tamburin, 2018).

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