

The Poisoning of an Icon: A Public Relations Challenge for Rival Universities

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Abstract

On February 16, 2011, Auburn University learned that fatal amounts of a controlled herbicide had been applied to two iconic oak trees on Toomer's Corner, and the act had been one of malicious intent by a fan of its rival school, the University of Alabama. Both universities had critical public relations challenges in front of them. Auburn wanted to keep the public informed about the trees' progress while encouraging students, fans, and alumni not to retaliate, and Alabama wanted to distance itself from the incident, asserting that the perpetrator was in no way affiliated with the university and to show its support for Auburn University. Both universities were largely successful at each of their respective goals.

Keywords: case study; higher education; agenda setting; image restoration theory; social media; football rivalry

Overview

On February 16, 2011, Auburn University learned that fatal amounts of a controlled herbicide had been applied to two iconic oak trees located at a traditional campus gathering place. That place is known as Toomer's Corner, and it has been the epicenter for celebrations by Auburn fans, alumni, and students for decades. These oak trees, more than 130 years old, are not just any two trees; of all the trees on campus, these two oak trees incarnate the heart and soul of Auburn ("Auburn University Traditions," 2011).

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public informed about the trees' condition while encouraging students, fans, and alumni not to retaliate. Alabama wanted to distance itself from the incident, asserting that the perpetrator was in no way affiliated with the university and also to show its support for Auburn University while retaining its traditional, but not malicious, rivalry.

Background

Auburn University is located in Auburn, Alabama, with an enrollment of about 25,000 students per year. A cherished part of student and alumni culture is known as the "Auburn Family," and students and alumni feel connected by what is commonly referred to as the "Auburn Spirit." This ecosphere of collegiate life is cultivated through many aspects of campus activities, but especially through the various sports programs. Football, as it is on many campuses, is king and has always been more than a sport for Auburn. Football and game-day tailgating are part of Auburn's culture and have evolved into an enduring Auburn tradition. The Saturdays when the team plays at home bring an "esprit du carnival" to the town of Auburn during the fall. Fans and alumni pour in from all over the Southeast, turning Auburn from a small city of about 40,000 to the fifth largest city in the state (Auburn University, 2011a).

Yet they do not come into town just on Saturday to attend the game. Beginning earlier that week, starting on Monday, massive RVs begin to arrive to set up camp on every available parking lot and green space in and around campus. As Saturday approaches, the festivities begin in earnest and a large part of the activity takes place where the campus and downtown meet, known as Toomer's Corner. It is also the location of Toomer's Drugstore, founded in 1896, which is directly across from the gateway to the campus where the two iconic 130-year-old oak trees flank the gates ("Auburn University Traditions," 2011).

Toomer's Corner has been the central place for campus and community celebrations, so "anytime there was something big or great to celebrate, that's where they [the fans] did it" (Woodbery, 2011). For several decades, each one of these campus celebrations has involved an unusual household product: toilet paper. After a victory on the gridiron, students, fans, and alumni head to Toomer's to "roll the corner." The streets are blocked off, people crowd the corner, and individuals toss rolls of toilet paper into the

two oak trees. After significant victories, the “rolling” tends to spread beyond the oak trees. Fans roll anything that stands still including streetlights, power lines, and trees all the way down College Street. In spite of its ubiquity, the origin of this tradition is uncertain. Housel and Ford (2009) claim it began in 1972, but other sources say it originated earlier when Toomer’s Drugs would receive telegraphed word of an away-game win, and Toomer’s employees would throw ticker tape into the trees to let the rest of the community know the team had won (“Auburn University Traditions,” 2011; Woodbery, 2011).

Regardless of its origins, “rolling the corner” is an integral part of the Auburn experience for fans, students, and alumni, and the two iconic oak trees stand proud at the epicenter. Therefore, when an anonymous caller to the Paul Finebaum Radio Show claimed he had poisoned the two Toomer’s oaks, it drew massive attention from many, including the national media, who came to Auburn to cover the story for their broadcast of the evening news (Shryock, 2011). On February 16, 2011, the university reported to the public that herbicide had indeed been applied to the trees “in lethal amounts” (Auburn University, 2011c), and one fact quickly surfaced. The man responsible for applying the herbicide, Harvey Updyke, or “Al from Dadeville” as he called himself on the Paul Finebaum Radio Show, was a self-proclaimed loyal Alabama fan, and his motives for poisoning the trees were, as he claimed, rivalry-related (McAlister, 2011). His call came shortly after Auburn defeated Alabama in the regular season and then went on to win the national championship. “Al from Dadeville” said he did this in retaliation for photos that he claimed to have seen in the Birmingham News depicting Auburn fans rolling Toomer’s Corner after an announcement of former University of Alabama head coach Paul “Bear” Bryant’s death more than 25 years ago in 1983, as well as pictures of an Auburn football jersey taped to Bryant’s statue earlier in the 2010 season. He ended his call by saying, “Roll damn Tide!,” a well-known rallying cry for fans of the Alabama Crimson Tide (Finebaum, 2011). A newspaper search, however, turned up no evidence of Toomer’s Corner being rolled upon Bryant’s death (Henderson, 2011). By attempting to destroy the iconic oaks on Toomer’s Corner, Updyke had not only allegedly committed a felony, but he potentially ended one of the most cherished traditions of Auburn students and fans, setting the stage for a dangerous kneejerk reaction and a damaged public image for the University of Alabama.

Football rivalry

The rivalry between Alabama's two largest universities, dubbed by ESPN as one of the nation's top ten sports rivalries, has a history of testing the limits of civility ("The 10 Greatest Rivalries," 2007). There are many elements contributing to this intensity, but at ground zero is the annual football contest known as the "Iron Bowl," referring not only the iron ore found in the Birmingham hills, but also to the fierceness of the culture surrounding the game itself. The Auburn-Alabama rivalry is a like a religion, obsessed about year-round. *Sporting News* reports, "You're born into it, you choose sides, and that's it until they throw dirt on you" (Hayes, 2007, p. 21). Alabama is a place where neighbors literally burn the score of the Iron Bowl into each other's yard (Hayes, 2007).

The Iron Bowl began in 1893 and continued for a brief 14 years until 1908 when disputes between the two schools arose over the teams' compensation and suspect officiating. No agreement could be reached and the rivalry was suspended for more than 40 years, until the presidents of both universities decided to put the past behind them and continue the game on one condition, that the game would be held at a neutral site. On December 4, 1948, before the Iron Bowl kickoff, the student body presidents of the two universities dropped a hatchet into a hole in Woodrow Wilson Park at the neutral site in downtown Birmingham to graphically "bury the hatchet" (Bechtel, 2003). The Auburn student body president in 1948 said, "There were a lot of hard feelings between the students. We were trying to get everyone to settle down and not be so vicious" (Bechtel, 2003). Legion Field in Birmingham was chosen as the neutral site that year and remained the home of the Iron Bowl until 1998, when the game gingerly returned to alternating schedules at each school's home stadiums.

The Auburn and Alabama rivalry remained intense but relatively peaceful until the years 2009 through 2011. In November 2009, Alabama won the Iron Bowl and went on to become the BCS National Champions. In the following year Auburn had its perfect season, beating Alabama on its way to becoming the BCS National Champions that year. Soon after and seemingly out of nowhere, on February 16, 2011, "Al from Dadeville" claimed on air that he had poisoned the Toomer's oaks with a powerful herbicide after Auburn defeated Alabama in that year's Iron Bowl. He said,

“The weekend after the Iron Bowl, I went to Auburn, Alabama, because I live 30 miles away, and I poisoned the two Toomer’s trees...I put Spike 80DF in them...They’re not dead yet, but they...definitely will die.” Updyke was arrested the following day (McAlister, 2011).

Research

Case study research was completed using these qualitative research concepts: (1) define the case being studied; (2) determine data that need to be collected; and (3) use collected data for writing the case study (Yin, 2009). The case was defined by specific research discovered from social and traditional media. Other data that were collected included: quotes from interviews, archival records from the university library, direct observation, participant observation with social media, and physical artifacts associated with Toomer’s trees. A case study database was generated for organizing the multiple sources of data, which helped to “address a broad range of historical and behavioral issues” (Yin, 2009, p. 115). Some analytic techniques used by the researcher were pattern matching, explanation building, and time-series analysis such as chronologies. The “chain of evidence” (Yin, 2009, p. 122) produced from the final result increases the reliability of the case study. In addition, media and public relations theories were utilized to understand and examine the case study more thoroughly.

Strategy

When “Al from Dadeville” proudly and publically claimed to have poisoned the trees to show his support for the University of Alabama, both universities were faced with a potentially damaging and dangerous public relations crisis. Three major groups of stakeholders were affected by this situation. The first group consisted of Auburn’s current students and alumni, as well as Auburn faculty, staff, and football fans. Another group of stakeholders included the city of Auburn residents who were not necessarily affiliated with the school, but were still upset that a landmark in their city had been vandalized. The final group consisted of Alabama students, faculty, alumni, and fans.

Both Auburn and Alabama were faced with challenges. Auburn had to (1) deter its students and fans from retaliating, and (2) keep the public

informed of the trees' health and the plans for saving them. Alabama had to (1) restore its image and (2) distance itself from Updyke. Both universities had their reputations at stake in the court of public opinion and the possibility of intense retaliation was real.

When the Toomer's trees crisis unfolded, it was imperative that the University of Alabama react very carefully. While Auburn University had to control a potentially angry public of students, faculty, and community, the University of Alabama had to make sure that it was represented as sympathetic and alarmed at the misfortune of what Updyke had done without unnecessary self-mutilation to its own sense of pride and tradition. The rivalry between the two schools was long-standing, yet respectful, and in the usual way school rivalries unfold, it was enjoyed. But it was the rivalry itself that provided the motive for this destructive action, even though the University of Alabama was not at fault. Because of this, the University of Alabama had to develop a plan that would support Auburn, protect Alabama from equivocal backlash, and also denounce and separate itself from one crazed fan that possibly could attain martyrdom for his actions.

Both Auburn and Alabama were faced with similar, yet specifically different problems. Following the initial announcement that Toomer's trees had been poisoned, Auburn needed to control the information transmitted by the media to keep its publics informed of the situation and to shape the issue for its publics (e.g., breaking news, what was being done, would the trees be able to be saved). It also needed to ensure that Auburn students and fans did not retaliate. To accomplish these goals, Auburn's objectives were: (1) to use traditional and social media as an outlet to continuously provide its publics with updates about the case; (2) to apply agenda setting and use traditional and social media to shape the case and encourage positivity in the minds of its publics; and (3) to use traditional and social media to convince its publics not to retaliate.

Like Auburn, Alabama needed to control the information being transmitted and shape the issue for its publics. Unlike Auburn, Alabama needed to control and repair the damage done to its image following the realization that Updyke poisoned the trees in *the name of Alabama*. Alabama's goals in this case were: (1) to keep its publics informed about the situation (e.g., what Alabama was doing to rectify the situation with

Auburn, what was going on in Auburn); and (2) to make it clear to all involved that the university did not condone Updyke's actions nor was he associated with Alabama. To accomplish these goals, Alabama's objectives were: (1) to use traditional and social media as a method of continuously updating its publics as to what was going on with the case; (2) to apply image restoration theory to repair the damage done to the university's image following the poisoning of the trees; and (3) to use traditional and social media to make clear to its publics, as well as the nation, that the university did not condone Updyke's actions nor was he associated with Alabama.

Theoretical Framework

Auburn and Alabama, as previously discussed, have different goals and objectives for this case; therefore, the case requires two different theories. In this section, agenda setting is applied to Auburn's situation and image restoration theory to Alabama's.

Agenda setting

Agenda setting describes how media can structure and shape events for the public. Agenda setting focuses on how media emphasize and cover certain events and how that emphasis influences the public's perception of those events (Wu & Coleman, 2009). The media have the capability to select certain events or specific views of an event and cover them more frequently or more prominently than others, thereby giving the perception to the public that those events or opinions are more important (Wu & Coleman, 2009). Because the media cannot report every single event, they must be selective in what they report. By selecting what to report, the media are ultimately selecting what events the public is thinking about and how it is thinking about them (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). McCombs and Shaw (1972) state that the media cannot change personal attitudes or the intensity of those attitudes towards an event; however, the media can influence what is salient in the minds of the public.

Agenda setting occurs on two levels. First, the media establish the important issues; second, the media determine what is important about those issues (Wu & Coleman, 2009). Essentially, the media determine the

issues and then frame those issues for the public. Agenda setting is not always successful, however, as it is dependent upon the credibility of the media source, the amount of conflicting information available from other media sources, whether the public perceives there is conflicting information, and the public's need for information and guidance (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Agenda setting is most powerful when the media source is highly credible, there is little conflicting information, and the public has a high need for information and guidance. All of these factors were present during the Toomer's trees crisis, which allowed Auburn to successfully apply agenda setting theory to shape the crisis for its publics.

During the crisis, it was important that Auburn ensured the information being released was correct and consistent. Auburn's publics had a great need and desire for information regarding the poisoning of the trees as well as a need for guidance in how to perceive and react to the crisis. The university produced a steady supply of information and guidance to the newspapers and news programs. It also created a specific dedicated location on its regular website that provided constant and accurate updates on the crisis. By applying agenda setting, Auburn effectively managed what information its publics received, when they received the information, and how they perceived it.

Image restoration theory

In a crisis situation, allegations of wrongdoing can damage an organization's image in the eyes of its publics (Marsh, 2010). How the organization reacts to the allegations also affects the way it is perceived by its publics (Marsh, 2010). Applying image restoration theory in times of crisis can help an organization minimize the impact of any allegations of wrongdoing while also protecting or repairing its image and reputation (Marsh, 2010), and it has become the dominant strategy for corporate communication in times of crisis (Dardis & Haigh, 2009). Image restoration theory's popularity is due in part to its ability to be implemented in a variety of ways depending on the crisis, because it emphasizes the value of having message options (Benoit, 1997). The theory consists of five strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, corrective action, and mortification

(Benoit, 1997). The University of Alabama implemented three of these strategies:

(1) Denial. This strategy is used when an organization simply denies the allegations. Denial can also be accomplished by *shifting the blame*, pointing to someone or something else that is responsible for the act. Although Updyke was an Alabama fan, he was neither a student nor an alumnus of the university, so Alabama was able to effectively shift the blame to Updyke without raising suspicions of simply “spinning” the story.

(2) Evasion of responsibility. This strategy attempts to provide reasons why an organization should not be held responsible for an act. Evasion of responsibility can be implemented with *defeasibility*, which is an organization claiming a lack of information about, or control over, certain elements of a situation. The University of Alabama had no control over Updyke or his actions and did not evade responsibility.

(3) Corrective action. This strategy attempts to correct the problem and prevent it from happening again. Although Alabama was not responsible for the poisoning of Toomer’s trees, they recognized that one of its fans was responsible and could damage Alabama’s reputation, and they recognized corrective action was needed.

Crisis Management/Execution

Auburn

(1) Keep publics updated and prevent retaliation. The day after Updyke’s arrest, Auburn President Jay Gouge stated that Auburn would take every step needed to save the trees, and concluded his statement saying

It is understandable to feel outrage in reaction to a malicious act of vandalism. However, we should live up to the example we set in becoming national champions and the beliefs expressed in our [Auburn Creed](#). Individuals act alone, not on behalf of anyone or any place, and all universities are vulnerable to and condemn such reprehensible acts. (Albert, 2011, para. 16)

This early statement by the University president was the first step in managing the crisis by calming the faculty, students, and alumni.

In addition, City of Auburn Police Chief Tommy Dawson spoke at a university press conference. He said, "I want to caution all Auburn fans to act with the class that we always act with...we want to let the justice system take its course" (CityofAuburnAL, 2011). From the beginning of the crisis, a concerted effort by officials emphasized sensibility and patience as a preferred reaction. By keeping the public constantly informed, the media could assure them that actions were being taken and that the justice system would deliver, with the intended consequence that it would be unnecessary for them to take matters into their own hands. Without supplying the information that justice was being served, it is more likely that fans would have tried to inflict some kind of retaliation on Updyke or Alabama fans, as the public may have felt that nothing was being done. However, due to the media's intense coverage of the event, the public could be assured that appropriate measures were being taken.

(2) Encourage positivity. "These trees will likely die, but the Auburn spirit will continue to live on in the hearts of Auburn men and women," said Debbie Shaw, vice president of alumni affairs at Auburn University, during an early-morning university press conference held the day after the news was released. "Even if they don't make it," NBC's Ron Moss said, "Auburn faithful say this cherished tradition will go on" (Shryock, 2011). This positive outlook created a minimization of negative feelings associated with the Toomer's trees poisoning (Benoit, 1997). Without negative emotions fueling the public, the probability of retaliation diminished.

Alabama

(1) Keep publics updated and distance itself from Updyke. According to a news report, the University of Alabama had no record of Updyke ever being a student at the University (Duncan, 2011, para. 5). This fact helped Alabama form the basis of its response to distance itself from a person who did not reflect the university's values. However, other news reports had the potential to give the impression that Updyke was directly connected with the university, such as one by Dan Fogarty describing Updyke as "the fanatical Alabama football supporter who is suspected of

poisoning the iconic oak trees at Auburn University” (Fogarty, 2011, para. 2), or by Charles Goldberg, who reports, “Updyke’s love for Alabama is unquestioned, so much so he named a daughter Crimson Tyde Updyke and a son Bear Bryant Updyke” (Goldberg, 2011, para. 12). Undoubtedly, Updyke associated himself with the university’s football team as a rabid and loyal fan, a fan so loyal he was willing to prove his love for the University of Alabama not only by uniquely naming his children, but also by destroying one of the rival school’s most cherished and difficult to replace traditions, potentially catapulting him to hero/martyrdom status. Separating a fervent fan like Updyke from the university in a time of crisis, especially when an angry public wants accountability and in the context of this historic rivalry, would be a delicate and difficult task with the distinct possibility of sustaining collateral damage.

The University of Alabama continued its direct campaign to distance itself from Updyke. Deborah Lane, spokesperson for the University of Alabama, wrote in an e-mail

The University of Alabama is glad that the individual responsible for damaging the trees will be held accountable. The individual who was arrested has never attended the University of Alabama and has never been a season ticket-holder. He is not affiliated with the university in any way. (Gould, 2011, para. 2)

In addition to having the public relations spokesperson release a statement, respected Alabama head football coach Nick Saban also released a brief statement that denounced the poisoning of the trees: “We are truly saddened by this destructive behavior from an individual who certainly does not represent our institution, our program, or our fans in any way” (Goodbread, 2011, para. 2). Concurrently, in order not to minimize the value of a healthy sports rivalry, Saban specifically noted, “The great rivalries and traditions are what make college football special, and we respect the traditions of every team we play, especially the schools in our conference and in our state” (Goodbread, 2011, para. 1).

While the University of Alabama made it clear that Updyke and his behaviors were not to be associated with the University, many people remained upset and blamed Alabama rather than the accused man. Aware of this anomaly, the University of Alabama took steps to protect its own campus from vandalism immediately following the release of the

information about Toomer's trees. Extra security was put in place, and police patrolled the traditional sites on campus including one of their own cherished icons, the grave of legendary coach Paul "Bear" Bryant (Gould, 2011, para. 4). In addition, extra security cameras were installed to obtain a better view of the campus and especially the statues of Alabama's famous football coaches, although school officials noted that security around the campus and its landmarks was not new (Gould, 2011, para. 5-6).

However, malicious revenge that could have triggered vandalism never materialized, and in February 2011, the leaders of the student government associations of both Auburn and the University of Alabama announced a plan to plant sister trees on each university's campus to create a permanent and visible representation of mutual respect for the age-old rivalry between the two schools. In a letter released by the two presidents, there was no mention of Updyke, but rather a commitment from one student body to another to "ensure that the values our universities have imbued in us—values of respect, fairness, empathy and honesty—live on for future generations" (Auburn University, 2011b). In addition, fans from the University of Alabama and its football team created a Facebook page, "[Tide for Toomer's](#)," to raise money to replace the trees.

(2) Apply image restoration theory. To repair the nationwide damage to its image, Alabama employed some aspects of image restoration theory including *shifting the blame*, *defeasibility*, and *corrective action*. In each case, Alabama used traditional media and social media to ensure that its publics were informed of its image restoration attempts.

Denial is one image restoration strategy that can be accomplished through simple denial and also through *shifting the blame* (Benoit, 1997). In this case, Alabama could not deny the act, but it could effectively shift the blame. If Updyke was associated with the university, then accepting some measure of responsibility for the poisoning of Toomer's trees must follow. On February 17, just one day after Auburn announced that the trees had been poisoned, Alabama announced that he was not, nor had he ever been, a student there nor had he ever been a season ticket holder (Sams, 2011a). By distancing Updyke from the university, Alabama made the case that it should not be held responsible for his actions, so the blame was

successfully shifted from Alabama to Updyke in the court of public opinion.

Evasion of responsibility is another strategy of image restoration, and one method that can be used to evade responsibility is *defeasibility* (Benoit, 1997). Alabama demonstrated defeasibility by claiming that it did not have control over Updyke's actions. Because he was not affiliated with the university, Alabama had no control over his actions. Although a fan's actions may reflect poorly on a university, the university cannot control the actions of all of its fans, especially when the act is committed away from the university, as it was in this case.

Corrective action is the final image restoration strategy employed by Alabama. Even though Updyke was not affiliated with the university and the university made that fact well known, Alabama perceived that its publics would expect the university to take some corrective action since the crime was the result of the Auburn-Alabama rivalry. It could also appear to those following the case elsewhere in the nation that Alabama did not care about the crime if it did not do anything. The university recognized that one of its fans was responsible and realized that fact could tarnish its image. Alabama took several actions to attempt to correct the situation including establishing a fund to help raise money to restore Toomer's Corner (Sams, 2011b), working with Auburn to plant more trees, and publishing articles in which the university acknowledged that Updyke's actions had crossed a line ("Poisoned Trees," 2011).

The Role of Social Media

Social media outlets played an important role in this crisis. After Auburn University informed the students, community, and the rest of the world about the tragedy surrounding its trees, numerous social media outlets covered the event, enabling a variety of publics to directly participate in the delivery of information and the reaction to the crisis. Twitter, blogs, Facebook, discussion boards, streaming videos, and other forms of social media were utilized almost immediately to inform friends and followers about the crisis surrounding Auburn and Alabama.

Blogs

Several blog postings surfaced the morning Auburn went public with the news of the trees (“Auburn’s Historic Toomer’s Corner,” 2011; Emerson, 2011; Enloe & McElroy, 2011; King, 2011; kleph, 2011; Low, 2011; Smith, 2011). Many blogs discussed the tradition of rolling Toomer’s Corner and then described the phone call to the radio show. Several blogs discussed how “insane” the rivalry between Auburn and Alabama had become (“Auburn’s Historic Toomer’s Corner,” 2011; Emerson, 2011; Enloe & McElroy, 2011; King, 2011; Low, 2011; Smith, 2011; kleph, 2011). These blogs allowed readers to comment on posts, providing the bloggers feedback from members of the public. This immediate and instant feedback in social media makes social media unique from most other media outlets.

Twitter

After the crisis broke out, several Twitter accounts were created to keep publics informed about Toomer’s trees. One account named @toomersoaks used personification and tweeted messages as if the trees were talking (“Online, Toomer’s Corner Tree,” 2011). This account tweeted things such as “Anyone know of a good home for 42 squirrels?” and “Never had Spike80DF before. From the name, I thought it was some sort of energy drink” (“Online, Toomer’s Corner Tree,” 2011; Toomer’s Oaks, n.d.). Other Twitter accounts included @tidefortoomers, which is a Twitter account run by Alabama fans, and Toomer’s famous lemonade had a Twitter account named @toomerslemonade (TideForToomer’s, n.d.; Toomer’s Lemonade, n.d.).

Facebook

Members of the Auburn family created Facebook pages to show their support for Toomer’s trees, such as “[All in for Toomer’s](#),” which helped raise money for Auburn during the crisis (Terry, 2011). By staying connected through Facebook, supporters of Toomer’s trees could post their opinions on the various Facebook pages that were created because of the crisis. In addition, Facebook was used along with Twitter to alert members of the Auburn family about upcoming events to support Toomer’s trees.

Facebook pages, such as "[Tide for Toomer's](#)," featured various postings by Alabama fans and students that showed their remorse for Updyke's actions and described the correctional measures that they were taking to save the trees (Hanson, 2011). This page utilized photos in its wall posts, such as pictures of Alabama students in front of the trees presenting a large check to the Toomer's Trees and Traditions Fund. The [Opelika-Auburn News](#) Facebook page also utilized the photo posting option by commemorating Auburn fans' favorite memories of the trees, thus immortalizing the trees' mystique (Opelika-Auburn News Facebook Page, 2011). Moreover, the wall posts demonstrated that Auburn fans were grateful for the effort that the students and fans of the University of Alabama were making. Likewise, the pages emphasized a sense of social responsibility on the behalf of the University of Alabama.

A Facebook page named "Rolling the Toomer's trees" allowed both Auburn and Alabama fans to publicly display their support of Auburn during the Toomer's trees crisis online. Another Facebook page, "[Toomer's Tree Hug](#)," memorialized the trees by creating and selling T-shirts (St. John, 2011). This offered the chance for supporters to purchase a piece of merchandise memorializing the crisis. Overall, the Facebook Toomer's trees campaigns provided all publics with a positive vehicle for social media commentary, as was evidenced by the high number of "likes" and fans of the pages from various institutions.

Online discussion boards and online forums

Discussion forums can be useful for media outlets to gauge what members of the various publics think. During the crisis, especially when the news was released to the public in February 2011, several different types of discussion boards were created (Auburn Eagle Message Board, 2011; CBSSports.com, 2011; Six Pack Speak, 2011; We Must Ignite This Couch, 2011). The two most common topics on these discussion boards were either comments by people who disliked Auburn and publicly disgraced the Toomer's tradition or comments by people who were advocates of Auburn and voiced their encouragement and support. The nature of discussion boards is continuous, on-going, online conversations, with every posted comment visible to the public. As such, in addition to the dissemination of positive comments, they could also provide a platform for counterproductive contributions and "flaming."

Evaluation

When reviewing this case, public relations practitioners can appreciate the importance of swift action. When Auburn was able to confirm what had taken place, it immediately launched an information campaign to keep the public updated and ultimately to keep the public from taking retaliatory action against the campus at Alabama. The importance of swift and accurate communications is illustrated in the Toomer's trees case, as the university was able to contain reactions with the timely outpouring of traditional and social media support. Without the timely dissemination of information, angry Auburn fans may have sought revenge on Alabama, which only would have made the situation worse and weakened the case against Updyke as a crazed fan acting alone.

What also can be learned from the Toomer's case is that *traditional* media are valuable partners in shaping the public's actions in a crisis. It was not just speed of delivery, but also the trustworthiness of news sources and spokespeople that created a solid public relations strategy for Auburn and aided the damage control by Alabama. Both schools had to work to achieve stances of innocence, and the rapid spread of information from trusted sources allowed them to not only maintain clean slates, but also to keep loyal fans from reacting in a way that would lower them to the level of Updyke. Overall, in generating positive public opinion and action, the public relations campaigns by both universities succeeded.

Analysis and Discussion

University of Alabama

The strength of the University of Alabama's campaign was that it avoided any attempt at nuance and directly and effectively spoke and acted, successfully shifting the blame to where it belonged. Rather than categorize all Alabama fans as spiteful in light of Auburn's recent National Championship, the university disassociated Updyke and showed not only Auburn fans, but also Alabama fans that these sorts of actions are not deemed acceptable through the eyes of the university or the football program. It was a strength to react as soon as they could and then to let everything settle by remaining quiet. An additional strength of the campaign was the university's use of various spokespersons, each

representing a different part of the university, but all with a unified message. Through having the right people speak on behalf of the university and then letting the situation at Auburn calm down, the University of Alabama showed respect for Auburn and contempt for Updyke's actions, leaving Alabama unscathed in one of the most upsetting and shocking events the rivalry has ever produced.

Auburn University

Like Alabama, Auburn's campaign objectives were largely effective. Similar to Alabama, the speed with which it reacted was a strength of the campaign and was critical to the success of several of its objectives. First, it needed to keep the public updated on information, so it was important for Auburn to be timely in the dispersal of its press releases, statements, and press conferences. Even more importantly, it was essential for Auburn to promptly deliver its message encouraging Auburn students to remain positive and not to be tempted to retaliate. If an Auburn public had wanted to retaliate, likely it would have been on the same day or week that the news broke, since that is when emotions would have been at their highest. The fact that no form of retaliation emerged is a credit to the effectiveness of Auburn's public relations objectives.

Social media

Social media proved to be a double-edged sword. While some forms of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, were able to promote constructive discussions and support from people on both state and national levels, other forms of social media, such as discussion boards, tended to ignite conflict. Because of this, public relations practitioners need to be conscious of differing social media characteristics. For example, if discussion boards would be created specifically for raising money for campaigns rather than to generate general discussion about the incident, perhaps the discussion thread would not be so littered with argumentative posts. Nonetheless, the nature of discussion boards lend themselves toward discussion of all types. Twitter and Facebook proved to be highly effective at gaining support through monetary donations for the trees, while blogs provided the most information on the crisis.

Social media were used not only to inform the public, but also to actively engage stakeholders and foster dialogic communication about Toomer's trees. While this was a feature once limited to the structure of traditional websites, Auburn University representatives, students, and other stakeholders actively used social media to voice their opinions and to disperse information. Even though goals of informing and engaging the public were met, not all published information was useful. Many Twitter responses, blog posts, and message boards displayed spiteful and offensive information at a time when both universities were under stress and in full view of the nation.

Ethical considerations

Bowen, Heath, and Lee (2006) asserted that public relations departments can, and perhaps should, serve as ethical consciences for their organizations. But they can also serve in that role for their stakeholders. Neither university necessarily had an ethical conundrum on their hands; there were no internal decisions needed to correct an ethical crisis. However, both universities did take it upon themselves to reach out to their publics in order to encourage *them* in an ethical direction, which is an ethical choice in itself.

All entities involved from the universities and community groups ensured a transparent message that displayed collaboration and teamwork. Although the Toomer's trees crisis has yet to reach closure, Auburn and Alabama continue to handle the crisis with poise and professionalism, although the level of intensity has normalized. Each university has, thus far, achieved its goals, kept its publics updated, encouraged positivity, and discouraged retaliation. Alabama succeeded in clearing its name, as it is now a well-known fact that Updyke was not, nor had ever been, associated with the university. Auburn and Alabama have also shown that rivalries can be healthy, and rival schools can work together in times of crisis.

As of the date of this publication, the fate of the trees is still unclear. A dedicated task force of horticulturists, landscapers, agronomists, engineers, chemists, and others has applied their collective skills to the rescue of the poisoned icons. However, their survival remains doubtful, and according to Auburn University Office of Communications and

Marketing, the trees “are not expected to survive” (Auburn University, 2012a; Auburn University, 2012b).

Discussion Questions

1. What options were available to the University of Alabama to address the anger at Auburn University and make sincere apologies?
2. What options were available to Auburn University to avert retaliation against the University of Alabama?
3. What obstacles might be encountered when your key stakeholder groups are from traditionally rival universities?
4. What obstacles might be encountered when your key stakeholders groups are composed of a variety of age groups?
5. How might theory inform public relations professionals about how to proceed in this crisis?
6. What public relations counsel would you have offered to either university in dealing with the poisoning of the Toomer’s oak trees?
7. What are the benefits and risks of social media in the transmission of information critical to resolving a public relations issue?

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