

United Breaks Guitars Viral Analysis

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University of North Carolina report*



Did you ever want to tell a company exactly how you feel?

In 2009, Dave Carroll did. And on July 6 of that year Mr. Carroll's Nova Scotia-based band, Sons of Maxwell, posted a protest music video on YouTube recounting their negative experiences with United Airlines.

Mr. Carroll, claimed the airline had broken one of his Taylor guitars while the item was in its custody. Further, he and other passengers claimed they'd seen baggage handlers throwing guitar cases on the tarmac during a layover at Chicago O'Hare.

After what he described as nine months of attempts to reconcile with United, Mr. Carroll produced and uploaded a music video called *United Breaks Guitars*. It immediately attracted attention on blogs, Twitter and other websites – an auspicious beginning to what eventually would become a major media story.

The quality of the song and production, coupled with a catchy tune chronicling the aggravations of Mr. Carroll, made the lighthearted David-versus-Goliath-style production an instant web hit.

Traffic to the video grew steadily, but real interest in the video and United's handling of the incident didn't spike until two days later, on July 8. This was right around when the mainstream media took notice.

By midday on July 8 the video had been viewed **137,896** times on YouTube, a relatively large number of views for that amount of time.

But the viral momentum of *United Breaks Guitars* had just begun. After the story hit mainstream media, it racked up **1,706,988** views by the end of July 10.

Much of the interest in the story was sustained by both traditional and social media. It was featured on prime time news broadcasts, in printed newspapers across North America and on many of traditional media's online news sites.

Between July 8 and 10, the story appeared in **339** mainstream online news sites and **777** blogs.

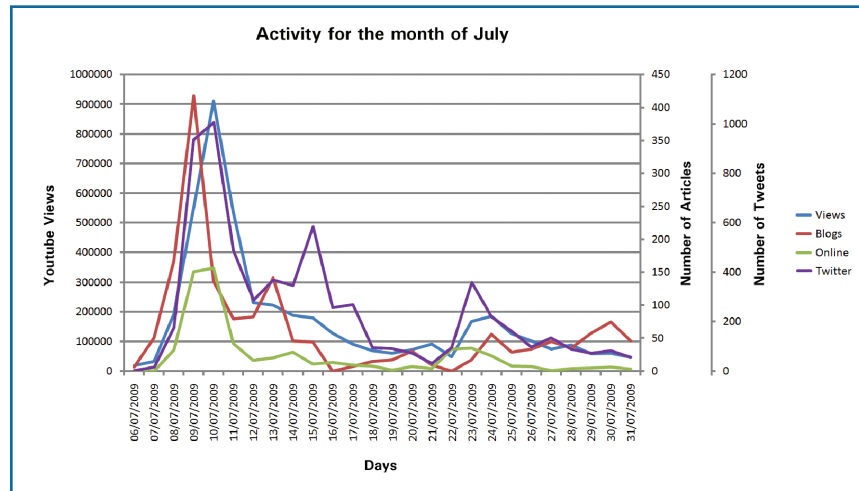
During this period, more than 2,000 relevant tweets were also recorded. From those tweets, over **86%** linked to either the original video on YouTube or a related website.

Just under half the links were to the YouTube video and the rest to news sites or blogs, most notably a story on NBC Chicago's website (which accounted for 50 links), further highlighting the viral effect of mainstream media.

By July 11 view counts on YouTube were still strong but slowly declining. This continued until July 23 when the story reignited after being picked up by British and Irish media outlets. Views on YouTube peaked at over **160,000** that day and more than **180,000** the next day.

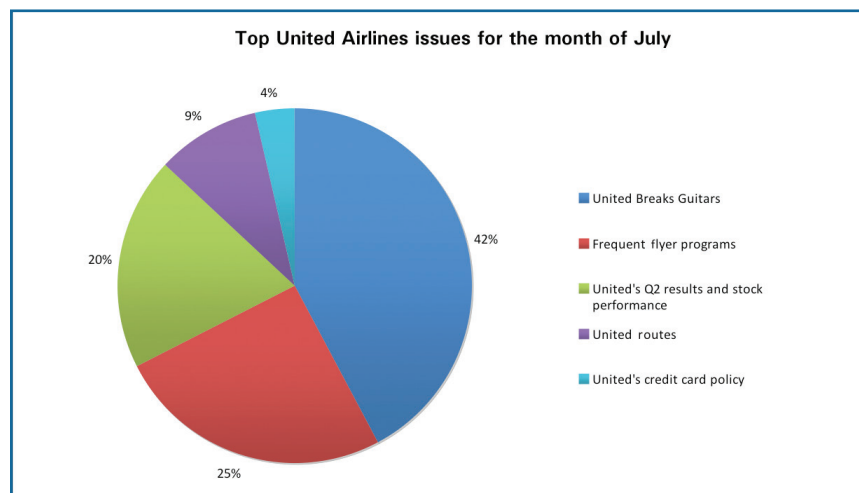
After July 24 YouTube views again declined, going down to just over 45,000 a day as of July 31. As of August 2010, the video was averaging around **20,000** views per day.

- Approximately **15%** to **16%** of Tweets about *United Breaks Guitars* were retweeted, compared to an overall Twitter average of approximately 9%.
- **86%** of Tweets about *United Breaks Guitars* referenced web addresses, compared to a Twitter average of approximately 40%.
- The top tweeters pertaining to *United Breaks Guitars* for the month of July were **@GuitarForever** (129), **@GuitarSafes** (50), and **@jenghauser** (30).
- The top three user handles that tweeted about the incident for the month of July were **@mashable** (1,080,653 followers), **@adventuregirl** (800,229 followers), and **@zoecello** (697,603 followers).
- The top three user handles retweeted the most were **@mashable** (121 retweets), **@DaveCarroll** (28 retweets), and **@shelisrael** (25 retweets).
- Total number of online news stories for the month of July – **625**.
- Total number of blog postings pertaining to *United Breaks Guitars* for the month of July – **1662**.
- Total number of tweets pertaining to *United Breaks Guitars* for the month of July – **5,980**.
- For the month of July, next to the actual link to the YouTube video, the link to the mashable blog was the most referenced with **271**.
- The most referenced hashtag or group was **united**.
- The top three mentioned words were **united**, **breaks**, and **guitars**.
- The total amount of views for *United Breaks Guitars* for the month of July was **4,524,334**.



The graph shows different media and how they potentially influenced one another and drove traffic to the YouTube video. Blogs were the early influencers, but traditional media, in this case represented by online news, seemed to have a more profound influence both on Twitter and YouTube. That said, it's possible that even though online news influenced Twitter, Twitter in turn could have influenced YouTube through links.

It should also be noted that clearly online news from the UK and Ireland had an effect on Twitter around July 23. Again, this was backed up by the volume of Twitter links from British and Irish sites. Views on YouTube also increased around this time.



The pie chart shows the breakdown of different issues in online news for United Airlines in July 2010. The United Breaks Guitars issue dominated the news for United Airlines with 42% of coverage.

The *United Breaks Guitars* video is an excellent example of how grassroots campaigns can go ‘viral’ across a spectrum of media, and how different media can influence one another.

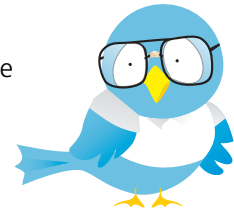
Blogs

In the case of *United Breaks Guitars*, when the video was placed on YouTube it struck a chord with key influencers on the web. The primary influencers at the beginning of the campaign seem to have primarily been bloggers.

Bloggers tend to be great influencers – a great deal of journalists also double as bloggers, and many bloggers not affiliated with mainstream media are viewed equal to traditional journalists. This is clearly evident in the case of *United Breaks Guitars*, where bloggers seemed to help spread the word.

What role did Twitter play?

Many claim that Twitter influences both traditional and new media. In this case, it is possible that Twitter might have alerted journalists. Many have turned from newsreaders to Twitter as a news aggregator. But in this case, it’s clear that the mainstream media had a greater influence on Twitter, than Twitter on the mainstream media.



This might be hard to prove during the initial spike, even though nearly half the tweets during that time referenced news or blog sites. That said, Twitter could have influenced the mainstream media since almost 40% of tweets referenced only YouTube. However, during the smaller spike in activity from July 23 to 24, British and Irish media covered the story almost exclusively.

During this same period activity picked up in Twitter, mimicking the spike in mainstream online media.

Again, one could argue that this was a coincidence and that maybe Twitter influenced the British and Irish media. But research also shows that almost all embedded links in tweets referenced mostly British and Irish online publications, clearly proving that mainstream media had more of an influence on Twitter in this case than vice versa.

This does not mean that Twitter had no influence – it’s still quite possible, especially with a large number of references linking to YouTube, blogs, and news sites, that Twitter had a profound influence in this case. The site’s ability to influence should not be underestimated.

Like blogs, many Twitter users are involved in other media and are key influencers. So how does one identify these influencers within Twitter?

Some view key influencers by the number of followers for a user handle. But this value can be deceiving – a more accurate evaluation is to identify how many times someone has been retweeted or referenced.

In this case, **@mashable** was reweeted 121 times in July. **@mashable** also had the largest number of followers of all the handles that tweeted about *United Breaks Guitars*.

Finally, besides YouTube, more people referenced the Mashable.com blog in July than any other source. This further highlights the power of cross-media influence and the influence that blogs still have on the web and media.

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