Introduction

Motivation

In most recent years, crises involving aviation incidents have been commonplace in the media, e.g. in the case of Malaysia Airlines MH370 as well as Air Asia 8501. These tragic incidents pose a communicational challenge for communication practitioners as they must meet the needs of salient stakeholders, and employ a communication strategy that complies with the type of crisis at hand. To further explore the topic, this paper will look at the crisis communication employed by Deutsche Lufthansa AG\(^1\) following the crash of Germanwings flight 4U9525 (hereinafter, flight 9525).

Problem Statement

To holistically address the crisis communication employed by Lufthansa, this paper will seek to shed light on the following problem statement:

\textit{To what degree was Lufthansa’s crisis communication, and herein its communication with important stakeholders as well as use of Twitter, sufficient after the crash of the Germanwings flight 9525?}

In tune with the statement above, we seek to examine the following sub-questions:

- Who can be considered Lufthansa’s central stakeholders in relation to the crash of Germanwings flight 9525?
- What crisis communication strategy was employed by Lufthansa in responding the crash of Germanwings flight 9525, and how did Lufthansa use Twitter in this response?
- How was Lufthansa’s immediate crisis response sufficient for handling the crash?

\(^1\) The group, as a whole, will hereinafter be referred to as Lufthansa. On the occasion it is necessary to distinguish between the group’s subsidiaries, i.e. Germanwings or Lufthansa as a sole airline, this will be done.
Methodology

To approach the problem statement and sub-questions, this paper will take on an structure inspired by Bloom’s taxonomic levels. Hence, we will first introduce relevant literature on stakeholder analysis, communication with stakeholders, social media, and crisis communication. In addition we will introduce literature on media relations and reputation/image that, while tangential to the core focus of the paper, will help in analyzing/discussing Lufthansa’s communication.

Subsequently, the paper will briefly analyze Lufthansa’s image, vision, culture, and reputation based on empirical data. We will then identify the main stakeholders following the crash of flight 9525 in addition to analyzing the type of crisis at hand, Lufthansa’s communication with the stakeholders identified, and, finally, how the crisis communication strategy can be seen in relation to prevailing theory on the topic. The analysis will primarily be comprised of deductive analyses of qualitative empirical data. As implied by the use of literature within multiple subject areas, the overall analysis of Lufthansa’s crisis communication will be eclectic in form. The eclectic approach will allow us to explore facets of the crisis communication outside the bounds of e.g. solely Coombs’ Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

Finally, the discussion will seek to explore if, based on the analysis, Lufthansa’s crisis communication was sufficient in relation to the literature reviewed. To supplement the discussion, empirical reflections will also be made, based on select quantitative/qualitative empirical data. The discussion will be concluded with an evaluation based on reasoned arguments.

Scope and Delimitation

While the crash happened in one of Lufthansa’s subsidiaries, communication efforts following the crash were not solely made by Germanwings, but Lufthansa as a whole. We will thus look at communication efforts by Lufthansa as a group. In doing so we will limit ourselves to communication made between March 24 2015 and May 4 2015. This allows for an analysis of communication with various stakeholders with differing degrees of urgency.
We will primarily focus on the accessible remnant relics of Lufthansa’s communication, in the form of press releases/-conferences, website updates, social media posts, etc. Within the time frame, we will focus on the first weeks following the crash of flight 9525. This focus is fitting as the group most actively communicated regarding the topic within this period. It should be noted, that while the analysis and discussion of Lufthansa’s communication will almost exclusively be based on primary sources, some secondary sources will be used to compensate for the lack of an archive of the the Germanwings’ “current information” website. In tune with the literature reviewed, our primary focus within social media will be Lufthansa’s activity on Twitter.

As the approach of this assignment calls for an analysis of the crisis at hand, which, per the literature that will be reviewed, entails an analysis of how the crisis was framed, we have looked at articles from major news sources such as The Telegraph, Wall Street Journal, Financial Times, etc. within the aforementioned focus period.

The paper will primarily make use of literature included in the curriculum for the Corporate Communication course, i.e. relevant chapters in Cornelissen (2014), and applicable course material. As the core focus of the paper is crisis communication, we have chosen to expand the theoretical basis on crisis communication introduced in Cornelissen (2014, p. 200-215), by looking at works by Coombs.

The Protagonist

Lufthansa is one of the world’s largest aviation groups, operating a fleet of some 615 aircraft (Lufthansa, 2015a, p. 57). Its passenger airline group, consisting of Lufthansa Passenger Airlines, Germanwings, SWISS, and Austrian Airlines, operates services to 271 destinations in 107 countries across six continents (Lufthansa, 2015a, p. 61). The low-cost carrier Germanwings is a wholly owned subsidiary of the group (Lufthansa, 2015a, p. 223). With a fleet some 78 aircrafts, it serves 130 destinations (McHugh, 2015). In January 2015, Lufthansa Passenger Airlines transferred responsibility for many of its intra-Europe flights to the subsidiary. Even though Germanwings competes with companies like Easyjet and Ryanair, the airline, like its siblings within the passenger airline group, makes use of Lufthansa’s infrastructure, e.g. Lufthansa Technik (Lufthansa, 2015a, p. 115). Germanwings can therefore be said to enjoy the
credibility- and quality reputation of its parent group. The crash of flight 9525 was the Germanwings’ first fatal incident since its founding in 2002 (McHugh, 2015).

Flight 9525

At approximately 10AM on March 24 2015, flight 9525 departed from Barcelona enroute to Düsseldorf. The last air traffic control contact was made with the plane, carrying 150 people including crew, at approximately 10.30AM. At the same time the captain of the flight left the cockpit in order to access the bathroom and handed the controls of the plane to co-pilot Andreas Lubitz. Over the course of the next approximately 10 minutes, Lubitz voluntarily set the autopilot to descend from an altitude of 38,000ft to 100ft. During this time, the captain attempted to re-enter the cockpit, which Lubitz had locked, and various air traffic controls attempted to contact the flightdeck. At approximately 10.40AM, the plane crashed into the French Alps, killing all 150 people on board. (Wellman, 2015 & BEA, 2015)

Literature Review

To approach the investigation of Lufthansa’s crisis communication following the crash outlined above we will now introduce the literature which will be used throughout the analysis and/or the discussion. To avoid redundancy, we will introduce theory by subject/type.

Stakeholders

Definitions

A stakeholder is defined as any party that “[...] can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s purpose and objectives.” (Freeman, 1984, p.6, cited in Cornelissen, 2014, p. 44). One can differentiate between two types of stakeholders, namely primary stakeholders that are involved in a firm’s financial transactions and its survival, as well as secondary stakeholders, who are affected/can affect an organization and are influenced by/can influence an organization. In tune with this, one can further differentiate between contractual stakeholders, e.g. customers and employees, and community stakeholders, e.g. media and local communities. (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 44-45)
Models to Identify Stakeholders

This paper will make use of two models to identify stakeholders, i.e. the Stakeholder Salience Model and the Power-Interest Matrix. These models are based on the same principles (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 50) and the use of both, in tandem, allows for a holistic analysis of Lufthansa’s important stakeholders.

In the Stakeholder Salience Model “[...] stakeholders are identified and classified based upon their salience to the organization.” (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 47). Stakeholders are prioritized according to three different parameters; power, legitimacy and urgency, resulting in seven stakeholder types (see Appendix 1). Power refers to the capacity for change a stakeholder can exhibit in relation to the organization (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 47). Legitimacy concerns “[...] the legitimacy of the claim laid upon the organization by the stakeholder group [...]” (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 47). Finally, urgency defines how acute it is for the company to interact with the given stakeholder group (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 47). The classification of the different stakeholders is dynamic (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 50).

The Power-Interest Matrix (see Appendix 2) also classifies stakeholders in accordance with their salience. This model uses power and level of interest to analyze stakeholders (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 50). By differentiating between powerful/interested stakeholders, the model can be used as a tool for adapting communication so as to cater for stakeholders with a high level of power and interest (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 50-51).

Managing and Engaging with Stakeholders

To manage and engage with stakeholders, companies can use the Stakeholder Model of Strategic Management. In the view of the model stakeholders comprise both stakeholders set out in the ‘neo-classical’ Input-Output model (suppliers, employees, investors and customers), and independent parties such as the government, communities, etc. Stakeholder engagement is a two-way process (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 42-43) and in order to secure that an organization is considered legitimate, the organization must “[...] engage with stakeholders not just for instrumental reasons but also for normative reasons [...]” (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 43), i.e. engage with stakeholders in regards to corporate performance reasons, but also consider “[...] individual
or group ‘rights’, ‘social contracts’, morality and so on.” (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 44). The latter differentiation between normative and instrumental engagement will be used to analyse/discuss Lufthansa’s communication with select stakeholders.

Crisis Communication

Building upon our summary of literature on stakeholders we can elaborate on crisis communication literature.

Definition and Implications

Cornelissen (2014, p. 201) provides a concise definition for what a crisis is, i.e. “A crisis is defined as an event or issue that requires decisive and immediate action from the organization.” During a crisis, organizations are faced with a high degree of pressure from important stakeholders to respond to a given event or issue that has become “active” (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 182-183).

A vital consideration for an organization is the effect a crisis can have on its reputation. Cornelissen (2014, p. 204-205) points out that regardless of the type of crisis that an organization faces, its response to the crisis at hand will determine the degree to which a crisis has negative implications. Via longstanding reputations with important stakeholders, some organizations build up so-called “reputational capital”, allowing them to avoid the stigmatization related to crises spurred on by e.g. wrongdoings (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 204). This concept will be explored further below.

Responding to Crises

Coombs

Coombs recommends that in responding to crises, organizations must “[...] be quick, be consistent, and be open.” (Coombs, 2006, p. 149) Additionally, Coombs has developed the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, that focuses on protecting an organization’s reputation and hindering emotions stemming from a crisis developing into behavioral intentions, i.e. stakeholders severing ties (Coombs, 2007, 166-169).
SCCT posits that an organization must assess “[...] how the crisis is being framed.” (Coombs, 2007, p. 166). Cornelissen (2014, p. 205-206) introduces Coombs’ crisis matrix, in which crises are classified based on the internal-external and intentional-unintentional dimensions. The matrix produces “[...] four mutually exclusive crisis types [...]” (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 206) (see Appendix 3). Moreover, Coombs (2007, p. 168) has identified three general crisis clusters also based on the level of perceived responsibility. They are, ranked low-high responsibility, the victim-, accidental-, and preventable clusters (see Appendix 4).

Following the initial crisis classification, “[...] crisis managers then consider the intensifying factors of crisis history and performance history [...]” (Coombs, 2013, p. 265), i.e. similar to the previously mentioned concept of reputational capital. Coombs (2013, p. 265), states that “If either intensifier is present, the attributions of crisis responsibility increase.”

Based on crisis type and intensifiers, SCCT recommends strategies based on a synthesis of corporate apologia, impression management, and image restoration theory (Coombs, 2006, p. 157). This holistic synthesis makes SCCT a fitting theory to use, as analyzing Lufthansa’s strategy in accordance with all of the latter approaches would be outside the scope of this paper. Various lists of strategies have been presented in connection with SCCT, including a list in Cornelissen (2014, p. 208). To ensure that the application of Coombs’ SCCT stays true to the author’s original works, we will use a recent list introduced by Coombs (2013, p. 266)².

Categorically, Coombs (2013, p. 266) introduces denial-, diminish-, and rebuild crisis response strategies, which each have a number of sub-strategies (see Appendix 5). Coombs (2013, p. 272) recommends the usage of these strategies in accordance with perceived crisis responsibility as per the latter order. Hence, denial strategies are recommended for low amounts of perceived responsibility and so on. A fourth type of strategy, namely so-called bolstering strategies, can be used as a complement to the three aforementioned primary strategies (Coombs, 2013, p. 266 & 272).

² Our main conclusions would also be able to have been drawn with Cornelissen’s list, albeit with different terminology.
Lukaszewski

In addition to the theoretical approach introduced above, Lukaszewski (1998) posits that seven dimensions must be fittingly handled in order to avoid the disruption or destruction of "[...] best efforts at managing any remaining opportunities to resolve the situation and recover, rehabilitate, or retain reputation." (Lukaszewski, 1998, p. 1). Common to the handling of these dimensions is the need to "Act with speed and honor. Help victims return to normalcy. Clarify what has been learned. Make restitution promptly." (Lukaszewski, 1998, p. 21). Lukaszewski (1998, p. 4-8) posits that executives must focus on the operations dimension, by having responses in the form of e.g. explanation, declaration, commitment, etc., and must focus on the victims of a crisis so as to avoid legal retaliation/media ramifications per the victim management dimension. In tune with the reputation facet of crisis communication, Lukaszewski points out the need for a company to pursue "[...] seven trust-building, fear-reducing, credibility-fixing behaviors [...]" (Lukaszewski, 1998, p. 10), among which are e.g. speaking clearly/openly, staying in touch, and providing advanced information (Lukaszewski, 1998, p. 10). In addition to the aforementioned trust/credibility dimension, the professional expectations dimensions recommends complying with set industry standards/ethics codes. The latter is supplemented by the behavior dimension where Lukaszewski (1998, p. 11-12) recommends avoiding e.g. not being prepared, shifting the blame, communicating inconsistently, etc. (Lukaszewski, 1998, p. 11-12). On the topic of ethics, i.e. the ethics dimension, Lukaszewski (1998, p. 14) stresses that "Business organizations and institutions are expected to have consciences and to act in ways that reinforce this public expectation." While not being as theoretically expansive as SCCT, the dimensions provide a good tool for discussing Lufthansa’s crisis communication.

Social Media

One way of communicating and interacting with stakeholders is the realm of social media. According to Cornelissen, social media is "[...] quickly changing how dialogues occur, how news about organizations is generated and disseminated, and how stakeholders are shaped and relationships forged." (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 259) However, the emerging media form "[...] can be seen as both a challenge and opportunity." (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 258) Social media can allow users to portray an organization badly, but also allow for more informal, dialogue based communication with stakeholders. Dutch firm M&I Partners have created a model to help
determine the degree of an organization’s social media maturity, i.e. how it is used. This model sets four stages an organization can find itself within, i.e. the ad-hoc-, experimental-, functional-, and transformation stages (ad-hoc representing the lowest maturity). The ad-hoc/experimental stages are viewed as tactical stages, implying social media use for certain goals, the transformation stage is viewed as a more developed strategic stage, and the functional stage is in between (Social Media Models, 2011). Each stage has various defining elements (see Appendix 6).

Social media maturity aside, Twitter was a social media platform frequently used by Lufthansa during, and before, the crash of flight 9525. Li & Bernoff (2011, p. 201-208) point out that organizations can interact with Twitter by listening, talking, energizing, supporting, and embracing with the platform. Likewise, they point out that organizations can leverage Twitter by e.g. using hashtags, retweeting, mentioning, linking, etc. (Li & Bernoff, 2011, p. 197-199).

While lacking a certain degree of theoretical depth, we will use Li & Bernoff's chapter on Twitter to analyze Lufthansa’s usage of the site, which in turn will contribute to our discussion. This will be complemented by the social media maturity model.

Complementary Literature

To support our analysis and discussion, we have find it fitting to introduce supplementary literature on media relations as well as image/reputation, culture, and vision.

Image/Reputation, Culture, And Vision

In continuation of the reputation facet of a crisis, it is worth introducing theory on how reputations are formed and managed. Cornelissen (2014, p. 138) points out that “[...] a corporate image may be defined as the immediate impressions of individual stakeholders in response to one or more messages from or about a particular organization [...]” and that “Corporate reputation can be defined as a subject's collective representation of past images of an organization [...]”\(^3\). Hence, while a crisis can spur on deterioration of reputation, this does not

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\(^3\) The differentiation between the two terms is disputed (Barnett, Jermier, & Lafferty, 2006), but as this theoretical facet is tangential to the focus of the paper, we have chosen to use the definition set out in the curriculum.
happen imminently, but through continual negative images of an organisation. To manage reputation, Cornelissen (2014, p. 76) emphasizes the importance of aligning vision, i.e. the management’s visions, the culture, i.e. employees’ perception of the organization’s culture, and the “[...] image or reputation in the minds of external stakeholders.” (Coombs, 2014, p. 76). This approach will serve useful in deducing if the crisis caused misalignment for Lufthansa, and discussing if the group’s communication strategy was sufficient to counteract this.

Media Relations

In order to look at the way in which Lufthansa dealt with communication with its individual stakeholders, it is also fitting to summarize key aspects of media relations. This also complements part of the theory review for SCCT, i.e. how a crisis is framed.

Organizations interact with the media to gather interest in a story about the organization, and to secure that reporting, i.e. the news frame, about the organization concurs with the preferred corporate frame (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 150-153). The latter can be seen in connection with the second level of the so-called agenda-setting hypothesis, which "[...] suggests that news coverage not only reports facts and neutral observations, but also conveys feelings through its stance and tone on the issue." (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 149). While media interest in the crash of flight 9525 was presumably a given, it can be assumed that Lufthansa had an incentive in securing an amicable news frame. Organizations can try to impact the news frame using e.g. press releases, press conferences, interviews, different forms of media monitoring and research, as well as online newsrooms (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 153-156).

Analysis

Having reviewed relevant literature we will now conduct an analysis of various relevant elements, i.e. the incident per the crisis definitions, the type of crisis at hand, communication employed, etc.
Lufthansa

To aid in determining the importance of the incident for Lufthansa, and to help discuss the crisis communication an analysis of the group’s vision, culture, and image, and in this connection, its reputation and intensifying factors, will now be conducted.

Lufthansa’s Vision, Culture, and Image

Lufthansa’s 2014 annual report indicates a vision based on trust and the group’s reputation as being safe. This is exemplified by the fact that Lufthansa mentioned the pursuance of a campaign of being “First Choice”, something which the group’s CEO, Carsten Spohr, says is a matter of trust (Lufthansa Group, 2015a, p. 9). The latter is also warranted by Spohr mentioning that “Our [rd. Lufthansa’s] most important priority, apart from safety, is our future viability.” (Lufthansa Group, 2015a, p. 8).

Based on remarks from others in the industry, it can be deduced that Lufthansa’s vision resonates in its corporate culture. This is warranted by the remarks of United Airlines CEO, Jeff Smisek, i.e. “We are proud of the partnership we have had with Lufthansa [...] we deeply admire your safety culture. We know that Lufthansa’s training and safety standards are among the highest in our industry, and that you work hard to fulfill your commitment to your passengers.” (Mangla, 2015)

As image is a stakeholder’s immediate impression about an organization, analyzing Lufthansa’s image is difficult. That said, Lufthansa has been highly rated in airline safety rankings, e.g. the 2015 JACDEC ranking (based on 2014 figures) where the group placed 12/60 (JACDEC, 2015). This can be presumed to have resulted in an image of safety being conveyed to stakeholders. Hence, one can deduce a pri-crisis alignment of the company’s vision, image, and culture.

Lufthansa’s Crisis Intensifying Factors and Reputation

In terms of potential crisis intensifying factors, the latter safety ranking can also be seen as what Coombs (2013, p. 265) would call “positive” performance history. Lufthansa, as a group, suffered its last fatal crash 22 years ago (Gänger, 2015). However, this may be too extreme to
consider in deducing whether the group has an intensifying factor in the form of a crisis history. Nevertheless, as per the aforementioned definition of a crisis, Lufthansa has seen many contemporary crises due to labor strikes (Weiss, 2014), stranding passengers, and thus requiring immediate action. Assessing Lufthansa’s treatment of its stakeholders in these crises is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the aforementioned image of Lufthansa being a safe airline group can be said to have grounded itself in empirical data on its reputation. Lufthansa ranked 46th in the 2014 Global RepTrak® 100 study (Reputation Institute, 2014, p. 7), which measures the “[...] reputation of the 100 most highly regarded companies across 15 countries” (Reputation Institute, 2014, p. 22). Being the only airline group in the top 50 (Reputation Institute, 2014, p. 7), it is fitting to say that Lufthansa enjoyed a high level of reputational capital before the crash of flight 9525, despite a history of labor crises.

Crisis Analysis

Thus, prior to the crash, Lufthansa enjoyed a good reputation, and the group’s vision, culture, and image seemed aligned. Building on our analysis of Lufthansa from a reputation/image point of view, it is now fitting to look at the incident in question.

Crisis or not?

Per the definition introduced in the theoretical review, the incident in question presented itself as a crisis. Lufthansa had to take immediate and decisive action in responding to stakeholders, e.g. next of kin, customers, etc., as will be further explored. Likewise, the crash was not merely an issue. Despite having emerged in a short period of time, the pressure to respond to stakeholders quickly was immense.

Crisis Perception

One can deduce two overall news frames attributed to the crisis, within the scope of this paper, i.e. the frame within the first 24 hours or so, and the frame after revelations of the crash’s intentional nature.

In the hours following the crash of flight 9525, in addition to reporting the fact that the plane had crashed, some media outlets, e.g. DW and The Wall Street Journal, presented the incident as
an accident (DW, 2015 & Michaels & Wall, 2015). ABC News echoed Lufthansa’s own cuing, quoting the group’s own initial assessment of the crash as an accident (Shapiro, 2015). That said, in the first 24 hours, The Telegraph ran an article with the title “Germanwings crash: How reliable is the A320?” (Alexander, 2015) and an article questioning the given plane’s technology (Rayner, 2015). Some media outlets attributed the crash to terrorism, yet a statement by the White House diminished this hypothesis (Rampton & Ahmann, 2015). Additionally, there was some speculation as to the prolonged descent leading to the crash, e.g. CBS News’ “Germanwings Flight 9525: The unusual nature of the crash” (CBS News, 2015).

Despite the varying initial news framing deduced above, based on the articles referred to, the crisis was generally initially framed by the media as an accident per Coombs’ Crisis Matrix (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 207). Due to lacking consensus on whether the accident was due to human-error or a technical fault, the initial framing of the crisis placed the crash between what Coombs (2007, p. 168) calls the accidental crisis cluster and the intentional crisis cluster.

This perception changed following the discovery of the inflight recorders. From March 25th onwards some media framed the crash in a new way and a new news agenda was set. The New York Times e.g. reported on how the captain was locked out of the cockpit at the time of the crash (Clark & Bilefsky, 2005), and media outlets subsequently started reporting on the established cockpit safety rules (FT reporters, 2015). The changing agenda is also exemplified in the new focus on Lubitz after a prosecutor asserted that he deliberately crashed the plane, e.g. The Guardian who published “Germanwings plane deliberately flown into mountain, says prosecutor” (Willsher, 2015). The new agenda spurred on focus on whether Lubitz was fit to fly, and if there were sufficient measures to identify pilots with psychological sufferings, e.g. The Independent’s article, “Andreas Lubitz: Germanwings co-pilot 'deemed unsuitable for flight duties' during training” (Saul, 2015).

Similar to the slightly disparate framing in the first hours following the crash, it would be incorrect to say that the abovementioned frames were the sole ones asserted by media. Yet it is apparent that the crash was no longer framed largely as an accident. New information led some media to start framing the incident as having been the responsibility of Lufthansa, who allowed Lubitz, a psychologically disturbed pilot, to fly (Saul, 2015), i.e. “[...] the airline would find it difficult to prove that the crash was not its fault.” (Knight, Harding, & Willsher, 2015). Thus, it is fair to say
that following the initial reporting on the crash, a new agenda was set, and a larger amount of responsibility was given to Lufthansa. Whereas the framing initially primarily placed the crisis between Coombs’ (2007, p. 168) accidental crisis cluster and intentional crisis cluster, the subsequent framing slightly furthered the crisis’ place in the latter, and thus the crisis appeared, to a certain extent, as a transgression on the part of Lufthansa (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 207).

In terms of the previous analysis of Lufthansa’s vision, culture, and image, one can deduce that this media frame presented itself as a catalyst of a gap between the image perceived by stakeholders and the group’s vision/culture, i.e. that transgression-esque activity leading to unsafe flight was incompatible with the vision and culture of safety.

### Stakeholder Analysis

Having identified the perception of the crisis, we can now identify the stakeholders which Lufthansa had to communicate with following the crash e.g. to realign its vision, image, and culture, and protect its reputation.

Following the crash, one can identify new important stakeholders who presumably were not relevant in the normal course of business. One such stakeholder group was the next of kin to the victims. Next of kin can be classified as a secondary stakeholder in the sense that they did not have financial transactions with Lufthansa per se, but rather normative/moral interests following the passing of their loved ones (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 41-42). Per the Stakeholder Salience Model (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 48), next of kin could be classified as having had both legitimacy and urgency, i.e. next of kin presumably urgently and legitimately wanting to obtain information regarding their loved ones. Therefore, the next of kin could be classified as a dependent stakeholder who, while lacking power themselves, could exert pressure on Lufthansa via e.g. the media (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 47-49), indicating that Lufthansa also had instrumental interests in engaging with next of kin.

Lufthansa states that it “[…] can only generate adequate returns for our shareholders and ensure that our employees have jobs with prospects if we have satisfied and loyal customers” (Lufthansa Group, 2015a, p. 9). In formulating a post-crash communication strategy it is presumable that customers presented an important stakeholder group to whom the company
had to reiterate an image of safety, and thereby protect reputation. Per the Stakeholder Salience Model (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 48), Lufthansa’s prospective customers presented themselves as a particularly powerful stakeholder, due to the fact that they had the power to take their business elsewhere. Yet, prospective customers lacked the legitimacy of current customers, and thus represented a dormant stakeholder group seen from the view of the Stakeholder Salience Model (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 48). Customers and prospective customers as a whole, however, were “key players” per the Power-Interest Matrix (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 50-51), due to the two groups’ common power of being able to secure the financial well-being of Lufthansa, and a presumable increase in interest in the organization following the crash. Next of kin could also take on the role as potential customers. However, in this paper, the two will be differentiated amongst.

Customers were not the sole stakeholder to whom Lufthansa had to solidify its image and thereby protect its reputation. The mention of the “First Choice” strategy in the 2014 annual report was presumably directed at shareholders. Hence, a challenge facing Lufthansa was to reassure shareholders that the intentional pilot crashing would not affect the earnings potential affiliated with this strategy. While the 2014 annual report (Lufthansa, 2015a, p. 17) mentions no individual shareholder with more than 5% of company stock, shareholders still played a paramount role, since decreased shareholder trust can diminish the financial health of a company. Thus, no individual shareholder can be said to have taken on the role of a definitive stakeholder per the Stakeholder Salience Model (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 47-50), yet all Lufthansa shareholders had both interest in the company and had power, and were thus also “key players” per the Power-Interest Matrix (Cornelissen, 2014, p. 50-51).

The media, can, as previously pointed out, frame a crisis so as to be interpreted in a particular way, and thus affect e.g. the image of an organization. While presumably playing a role in the ordinary context of most organizations, the media, via its implicit role of being a messenger, conveying information to stakeholders during times of a crisis, serves a particularly salient stakeholder during a crisis. Hence, by transitivity, the media also took on a role as a powerful stakeholder following the crash despite having a non-contractual-, community based stake in the group, as compared to e.g. a shareholder.
Other stakeholders, e.g. employees, government, etc. could also have been considered. However, in light of this paper’s length, the four stakeholders pointed out above, who each played a central role for Lufthansa per our analysis, serve as fitting anchors upon which to analyze Lufthansa’s communication.

Communication With Stakeholders

In communicating with the abovementioned stakeholders, Lufthansa used a range of communication channels, and progressed through phases with varying focuses, as will be deduced below.

Stakeholders are likely to have been interconnected to a high degree. Thus, in analyzing the communication with the stakeholders it is important to note that no single communication channel can be said to have been proprietary to a given stakeholder, i.e. that communication directed at next of kin could also be viewed as indirect communication with the media. Yet one can presume, based on content, that some of Lufthansa’s communication was more geared towards one stakeholder than the other.

Communication with stakeholders during the hours following the crash

On the day of the crash of flight 9525, one can deduce that Lufthansa primarily focused on communicating with two stakeholders, namely the next of kin and media. Most communication from the group was informational in nature, and hence, Lufthansa was not trying to convince customers that their focus on safety was invalidated by the crash, but was rather trying to inform.

Lufthansa initially tweeted “We have recently become aware of media reportsspeculating on an incident though we still do not have any own confirmed information [...]” (Luege, 2015) at 11.52AM, but did not confirm the crash for another two hours via social media, despite various sources, including French President, Francois Hollande, doing so earlier. Additionally, the Germanwings website was inaccessible for most of the day (Luege, 2015). That said, later during the day Lufthansa held press conferences (Fox News, 2015), updated accessible websites to show information on the flight (Hodgson, 2015, slide 12-13), and issued a press
release not only informing stakeholders of the crash, but of their deep sorrow and grief (Lufthansa, 2015b).

The sorrow was solidified by a change of colors on the group’s various social media sites, i.e. from standard full color pictures to more somber, grayscale counterparts (Hodgson, 2015, slide 8 & 12). Per Li & Bernoff (2011, p. 203-207), Lufthansa supported and talked with twitter, i.e. in the sense that next of kin were informed using the social media, but also helped to access hotlines created for them (Germanwings, 2015a-c).

Communication with stakeholders in the days following the crash

In the days following the crash, Lufthansa expanded the scope of its communication, albeit with continued focus on next of kin/media. Spohr mentioned in an interview with CNN that communicating with the victims of the crash, i.e. the next of kin, was the main focus of Lufthansa (CNN, 2015a, T: 0.00-0.12). Lufthansa continued to use social media to communicate with next of kin, but also used its websites where information was posted, e.g. regarding flights to the crash sight for next of kin (Lufthansa, 2015d). It can also be inferred that Lufthansa established more direct channels of communication with the next of kin, as implied by Spohr in an interview, i.e. “[...] we managed to get the information [rd. revelations regarding intentionality] to them [rd. relatives] before they found out from the media [...]” (CNN, 2015a, T: 0.26-0.32), and a press release from March 28, i.e. “Families and friends of the passenger and crew members of Germanwings flight 4U 9525 have asked Lufthansa and Germanwings to shield them from any questions coming from the media.” (Lufthansa, 2015g). This direct communication may have stemmed from Lufthansa’s family assistance center in Marseille (Germanwings, 2015d), and the fact that it sent counsellors to the relevant airports following the crash (CNN, 2015a, T: 0.18-0.20). Hence, one can deduce that Lufthansa continued to engage normatively with the next of kin, providing help and information on the situation.

Lufthansa held press conferences in the days following the crash. On March 26, in response to revelations of the intentional nature of the crash, Lufthansa explained Lubitz’ background within the organisation, pilot testing, and cockpit safety rules (Lufthansa, 2015e, T: 3.00-4.55 & 15:50-16.10). Likewise, additional press releases were made available in relation to the revelations, e.g. a press release on the group’s knowledge of Lubitz’ medical history (Lufthansa, 2015h). It can be assumed that this communication, while indirectly targeted towards all
stakeholders, must have been primarily geared at engaging instrumentally with the media to avoid having an unamicable news frame/agenda being set. Compared to the empathetic and informal tone of the first press release, i.e. “Our thoughts and prayers are with the families and friends of the passengers and the crew members.” (Lufthansa, 2015b), latter press releases became more formal, showing less emotion and forgoing the use of personal pronouns, i.e. “Germanwings and Lufthansa will continue to provide all the care and assistance needed by relatives and friends of passengers of flight 4U 9525 in this difficult situation.” (Lufthansa, 2015d)

In the days following the crash, one can deduce a newfound effort to engage instrumentally with both current and prospective customers, presumably to avoid them using their power to shift their business to another airline, and to realign the aforementioned misalignment. On March 25th, Lufthansa published a video via the social media platforms Youtube, Twitter, and Facebook featuring Spohr addressing partners and customers stating: “[...] we [rd. Lufthansa] will work day and night [...] to make sure that flying is once again made even safer [...]”. (Lufthansa, 2015c, T: 1:29-1:43). On March 27th Lufthansa also published a written press release on their website stating that all group member airlines had adopted the “rule of two”, demanding the presence of at least two people in the cockpit (Lufthansa, 2015f). This change was also promoted via Twitter (Germanwings, 2015e), thus expanding the audience from merely those observant to Lufthansa’s press releases to social media users, the latter of which can be presumed to host a fairly large amount of Lufthansa’s customers.

Thus, Lufthansa continued its social media activity in the days following the crash, e.g. on Twitter. One can infer that Lufthansa leveraged some of the tools pointed out by Li & Bernoff (2011). In the days immediately following the crash they extensively used hashtags such as #4U9525, in reference to the flight number, and #indeepsorrow. In addition, one can deduce a continued attempt to talk with Twitter. Similar to the informational tone taken during the day of the crash, the group, as mentioned, posted tweets to keep its various stakeholders informed. Furthermore, Lufthansa posted generic daily update tweets linking to updates on its websites, e.g. on the creation of the family assistance center (Germanwings, 2015d). The group leveraged the lesser formal tone of Twitter, as compared to a press release, to solidify its sorrow and focus on the next of kin in a more informal way. This is warranted e.g. by a tweet showing Lufthansa’s internal magazine published in grayscale (see Appendix 7) and a tweet showing a personalized
letter reiterating Lufthansa’s sorrow, albeit with abundant use of personal pronouns (Germanwings, 2015f).

Germanwings also continued to support using Twitter by replying to users who had questions relating to the crash, e.g. questions relating to the passenger list (see Appendix 8). However, Lufthansa did not respond to all inquiries, e.g. users critically asking why the company did not release passenger lists, why there was no rule demanding two people in the cockpit, and critically commenting on Spohr’s remarks on the psychological suitability of pilots (see Appendix 9 & 10). While determining Lufthansa’s social media maturity as a whole is outside the scope of this paper, per the model put forth by M&I Partners, Lufthansa’s use of Twitter indicates a number of things. The lack of a consistent response strategies, i.e. engaging with some users and not others, indicates a low level of social media maturity, namely within the experimental stage (Social Media Models, 2011). However, Lufthansa used Twitter for a specific purpose, in this case communication with various stakeholders in the midst of a crisis, and engaged externally, thus indicating a level of maturity above the experimental stage (Social Media Models, 2011).

Communication with stakeholders in the weeks following the crash

In the weeks following the crash, Lufthansa continued to communicate with stakeholders using social media, press releases, press conferences, interviews, etc. Based on the group’s social media pages, press releases, and press conference activity one can deduce a reduction in the amount of crisis-related content in the beginning of April. That being said, as of the beginning of May the Germanwings website still had a sub-section on the crash (Germanwings, 2015g). Additionally, on May 4th the group’s 1st quarter report was released. While one can say that all the preceding forms of communication were implicitly also directed towards shareholders, this represented the first formal communication specifically targeting shareholders, and hence the first time shareholders took on an important role in the communication efforts. In the report Lufthansa reiterates its sorrow and its commitment to supporting the next of kin (Lufthansa, 2015l, p. 1). However, one can also detect Lufthansa engaging with shareholders for instrumental reasons, i.e. explaining the incident in the context of earning potential:
“For the full year, Lufthansa Passenger Airlines still expects earnings to go up significantly. The strikes to date and the tragic loss of Germanwings flight 4U 9525 certainly have negative effect on advance bookings, but do not alter this qualitative forecast.” (Lufthansa, 2015l, p. 23)

Crisis Communication Strategy

Having analyzed how Lufthansa communicated with individual stakeholders it is fitting to analyze the overall tone of the communication and how this developed.

Victim and Source of Aid

Lufthansa’s general communication strategy before the revelations related to Lubitz bore similarities with a bolstering strategy (Coombs, 2013, p. 266), in the sense that Lufthansa portrayed itself as a victim of the crash. In the aforementioned video of Spohr posted to social media sites, he used pronouns such as ‘we’ to emphasize that Lufthansa was also a victim of the crash, e.g. “Less than 24 hours ago a tragedy happened which all of us at Lufthansa hoped we would never experience […]” (Lufthansa, 2015c, T: 0.06-0.14). He emphasized how Lufthansa was especially affected by the crash, due to its focus on safety, and how the company will work to make flying even safer (Lufthansa, 2015c). Bolstering strategies of victimization and reminding stakeholders of its safety focus were not the sole strategies pursued throughout this period however. Lufthansa did not apologize for the crash in the initial hours, and thus, did not explicitly accept responsibility. That being said, via its urge to help victims and the investigation, e.g. solidified by Thomas Winkelmann’s remarks in the initial press conference on March 24th (Fox News, 2015, T: 4.30-4.45 & 5.15-5.38), one can deduce the pursuance of a type of rebuild strategy in the form of what Coombs (2007, p. 272 & 2013, p. 266) calls compensation. While the lack of monetary support in the initial period diminishes the extent to which one can refer to Lufthansa’s initial behavior as compensation (Coombs, 2013, p. 266), the sheer nature of the behavior can be argued to fit with a characteristic of Coombs’ rebuild strategies, i.e. “Rebuild strategies attempt to improve the organization’s reputation by offering material and/or symbolic forms of aid to the victims.” (Coombs, 2007, p. 172).
We are not at fault

Following the revelations of flight 9525’s intentional nature, one can detect a change in the tone of Lufthansa’s communication, which began showing slight traits of so-called diminish strategies (Coombs, 2013, p. 266). In responding to the new revelations and media agenda e.g. Spohr’s rhetoric becomes more defensive as he downplayed Lufthansa’s responsibility for having a pilot like Lubitz in the skies. The latter is solidified in a press conference on March 26th where Spohr mentioned that Lubitz was fit to fly and that no safety systems could have caught Lubitz’ psychological suffering (Lufthansa, 2015e, T: 3.48-6.11 & 6.55-7.33). Likewise, in the CNN interview where Spohr reiterated the group’s focus on next of kin, he also denied the need for reforming the rules on the required amount of people in the cockpit, as industry norms did not call for it (CNNa, 2015, T: 4.03-4.58). The latter concurs with what Coombs (2013, p. 266) calls diminish strategy in the form of an excuse, i.e. “[…] claiming an inability to control events that led to the crisis.”

It should be noted that the extent of the diminish strategy employed was slightly undermined in Lufthansa’s communication as well. This is exemplified by the fact that Spohr hinted at intentions to revisit safety procedures based on expert opinions (CNN, 2015a, T: 2.05-3.00 & 4.50-4.58) and the fact that the group, as mentioned previously, issued a press release stating its change on rules regarding amount of people required to be in the cockpit (Lufthansa, 2015f).

Prior to the end of March, while not having explicitly accepted responsibility for the incident and having taken on a more defensive tone, Lufthansa continued its focus on helping the victims. This is e.g. exemplified per the previously mentioned family assistance center and the offering of an immediate compensation amount (Lynch, 2015). These examples solidify the rebuild strategy of compensation. Likewise, the victimization approach pursued was solidified, e.g. in a press conference on March 26th, where Spohr underlined how the intentional crashing was tragic and sad for a company that values and focuses on safety (Lufthansa, 2015e, T: 1.45-2.17).
Time to say sorry

At the turn of March, one can deduce a final change in Lufthansa’s tone and communication. Per the analysis of Lufthansa’s communication with select stakeholders, the group released a press statement on Lubitz’ medical history on March 31st stating that they knew that Lubitz had incurred "[...] previous episode of severe depression [...]" (Lufthansa, 2015h). Likewise, during a press conference at the site of the crash on April 1st, Spohr altered his tone. He stated that Lufthansa was "[...] very, very sorry that such a terrible accident could have happened [...] sorry for the losses that occurred [...]" (CNN, 2015b, T: 3.00 - 3.20).

Lufthansa progressed to taking further responsibility for the crash and informally apologizing. Hence, one can deduce that the group’s communication strategy further developed in the direction of a rebuild strategy, i.e. an informal apology coupled with help and monetary compensation for the next of kin. The apology made by Spohr should not be overemphasized. However, as Spohr apologizes for an accident happening (CNN, 2015b), i.e. not Lufthansa having committed a transgression-esque act.

Synthesis

Thus, Lufthansa enjoyed a good reputation before the crash, and its vision, culture, and image were seemingly aligned. Due to a change in media frames, the crash presented itself as a catalyst for misalignment in Lufthansa’s vision, culture, and image mix. One can identify four salient stakeholders who Lufthansa had to respond to for different reasons. Lufthansa’s communication with these stakeholders developed over time, and one can deduce the usage of the modes of interaction allowed by e.g. Twitter. Seen in a macro perspective, one can deduce a change in the overall crisis communication employed by Lufthansa, i.e. from a strategy exuding little responsibility, to one that exuded even less, and finally, to strategy exuding a greater amount of responsibility, albeit while simultaneously pursuing a bolstering strategy and continually helping next of kin.
Discussion

Lufthansa’s communicational response to the crash of flight 9525 has been both loathed and applauded (Luege, 2015 & Davies, 2015). In discussing the extent to which the crisis response was sufficient we will first look at the ‘micro’ level, i.e. drawing upon examples from the analysis of the communication with individual stakeholders, and then the ‘macro’ level, i.e. the overall crisis communication strategy pursued by Lufthansa. To add a non-theoretical dimension, we will also reflect on empirical data.

Micro Perspectives

It is clear that next of kin took on an important role in Lufthansa’s communication from the onset. Per the stakeholder analysis, it can be presumed that the content of Lufthansa’s communication in a non-crisis context is highly focused on engaging with customers, shareholders, potential investors and other stakeholder groups for instrumental needs. As pointed out in the analysis, Lufthansa didn’t explicitly engage instrumentally with e.g. shareholders, in relation to the effect of the crisis on Lufthansa’s business, till some time after the crisis. This initial focus on engaging normatively with the next of kin undeniably poses itself as a clear strength and sufficient facet of Lufthansa’s communication following the strategy. This is backed up by Lukaszewski (1998, p. 14 & 21) who, as mentioned, points out that good crisis communication focuses on helping victims, and should be defined by having a conscience. Hence, in this case not focusing on the ramifications for shareholders, but rather on the next of kin who lost loved ones. It should be pointed out that the Lufthansa's interaction with the next of kin could also be seen as an example of the group implicitly engaging instrumentally to avoid backlash. However, such an argument does not diminish the sufficiency of the normative engagement, but rather complements it.

In the theoretical review we mentioned that Lukaszewski (1998, p. 4-8 & 10) underlines the importance of the operational dimension of crisis communication, where e.g. explanation is emphasized, and the trust/credibility dimension, in which staying in touch with stakeholders and providing advanced information is emphasized. Lufthansa arguably did these things in its communication with the media. Lufthansa was, per the analysis, active in holding press
conferences, commenting on new revelations, and presenting its own information. While Lufthansa’s efforts at managing and engaging with the media arguably did not result in a particularly amicable news frame being set, had Lufthansa not stayed in touch with the media and not explained information as it did, the media could possibly have framed the crash in an even less amicable manner thus furthering misalignment between image and culture/vision.

However, while the eminent role taken by the media can be said to have been sufficient for the given crisis, it does appear that the company was caught off guard, as is solidified by the aforementioned slow response on Twitter. As implied in the analysis, Lufthansa’s response to the crisis was flawed vis-a-vis the crash of websites, slow per late Twitter updates, and unorganized, per the change of colors before confirmation of the crash. This exposes the lack of adequate contingency planning, something which does not comply with the being prepared element of Lukaszewski’ (1998, p. 11-12) behavior dimension. Such an insufficiency argument is furthered by Coombs’ (2006, p. 149) form lessons which stress being quick and consistent. The lack of contingency planning ensuring a consistent initial crisis response, would arguably have improved stakeholders’ first impression of the crisis communication.

Per the analysis, the slow response on Twitter led to a great deal of usage of the social media site and one can argue that Lufthansa successfully used the scope of possibilities on Twitter. The group not only talked with Twitter but, as pointed out, also supported. Likewise, one can argue that Lufthansa’s leveraging of an informal tone supplemented the sufficiency of the crisis response. Customers and other stakeholders were able to see a more informal commitment to realigning image and culture/vision vis-a-vis e.g. the aforementioned pictures and letters posted. This communicational effort once again lived up to Lukaszewski (1998, p. 10-11) trust and credibility dimension, in the sense that the communication via Twitter focused on reducing fear and rebuilding trust in the airline by staying in contact and talking with stakeholders in a clear and open way.

However, the use of social media in the form of Twitter cannot be seen as solely a strength contributing to the sufficiency of the crisis communication. As pointed out, there were several disgruntled prospective customers who showed their discontent with the situation and actively berated the Twitter accounts of Lufthansa following the crash. This may be due to Lufthansa not having attained the highest levels of social media maturity per M&I Partners’ model, as pointed
out indicated in the analysis. That said, such unperfected social media maturity does not rectify the Lufthansa’s slightly insufficient response on Twitter. In accordance with Cornelissen (2014, p. 258), this shows there was a residual learning curve for Lufthansa, and that the crisis posed as both an opportunity to learn about social media, but also a communicational challenge.

All else aside, as implied in our analysis, the communicational dynamic between the stakeholders arguably pertains a holistic strategy in addressing and managing the stakeholders. Closer distance between stakeholders, as facilitated by e.g technology, means that the obligations in managing stakeholders for the modern organization is increased. Lufthansa engaged with stakeholders who took considerable roles after the crash via a vast array of channels e.g.Twitter, press releases, interviews, website updates, etc. While not doing perfectly in each of the channels, doing so arguably became an important asset in successfully applying a communicational strategy which was sufficient and appropriate. Neglecting the multi sided communication potential between stakeholders could have inhibited the company from correctly communicating with stakeholders, and left a communicational blind side to some stakeholders.

Macro Perspectives

Having discussed the communication specific to individual stakeholders, it is fitting to look at the overall communication strategies pursued by Lufthansa per our analysis of Lufthansa’s crisis communication from the perspective of SCCT.

Based on our analysis of articles from the period, one can deduce that some media framed the incident as an accident at first. Hence, low responsibility was to a certain degree, initially attributed to Lufthansa. During this period, one can say that Lufthansa’s initial crisis communication strategy, which it exuded an aura of lacking responsibility for the crisis, was befitting and sufficient seen in relation to this perception. This is warranted by the the doubt as to whether the crisis was an internal or external human error, along with Lufthansa’s high reputational capital and non-intensifying factors. However, the victimization strategy which Lufthansa pursued throughout this time, should not per Coombs (2013, p. 272) have stood alone, but rather be used as a complementary strategy.
One could argue that the victimization strategy was merely a supplement to the rebuild strategy pursued by Lufthansa at the time. However, this further poses as a facet of the communication seemingly incompatible with Coombs’ (2013) recommendations on crisis response strategies. This is solidified by the arguable presence of a ‘conflict of responsibility-taking’. The two strategies can be said to indicate varying level of responsibilities, in the sense that Coombs (2015, p. 152) posits that victimization should only be used when little responsibility is perceived to be borne by the organization, and that rebuild strategies imply a higher level of responsibility (Coombs, 2013, p. 272). However, such an argument should be taken with a grain of salt. SCCT like all theories is not a perfect reflection of the real world, and hence, its recommendations are far from definitive. While a rebuild strategy mixed with victimization might seem counterintuitive, an airline not helping the victims of a plane crash would arguably represent something of an abnormality within the industry. Ferguson & Nelson (2014, p. 242) recommend that airlines should be prepared for crashes by having e.g. accident responders, family assistance, etc. Hence, the counterintuitive mix may be justified by way of a presumable industry norm.

As mentioned in the analysis, this seemingly contradictory mix of high/low responsibility strategies was continued through the entirety of the analysed period. However, while the contradictory mix may be justified based on expected behaviors within the airline industry, Lufthansa’s subsequent focus on downplaying responsibility arguably clashes with SCCT, and thus, represents an insufficient facet of Lufthansa’s crisis communication. As mentioned, based on the articles analyzed, the media progressively attributed a higher amount of responsibility to Lufthansa. Hence, in following the previously deduced diminish strategy, which, according to Coombs (2013, p. 272), should only be used when little responsibility is seen to be borne by the given organization, Lufthansa was arguably at terms with the set news frame. This news frame, as mentioned, placed the crash to some degree in the intentional crisis cluster.

It should be noted, that the latter clash could have been a deliberate attempt to change the framing set on the incident, which could have been in tune with the presumed intent of aligning image and culture/vision. Likewise, in a more non-theoretical context, the fact that Lufthansa did not take responsibility, but rather denied outright responsibility, might have been the result of legal worries, rather than eminent disregard for Coombs’ recommended strategies. In other words, Lufthansa might have feared that admitting responsibility could have led to legal and financial ramifications.
All else aside, the last phase of Lufthansa’s crisis communication strategy, in which the group made a move towards more full fledged rebuild strategy, can be said to have represented a greatly sufficient facet of Lufthansa’s crisis response. Per Coombs (2013, 272), the gradual move towards a more rebuild-strategy influenced communication in this period is fitting with the aforementioned framing following the initial media coverage of the crash. One could argue that the greater extent of the rebuild strategy pursued may not have revealed the same degree of explicit attempt to realign image and culture/vision as the previous denial strategy, since Lufthansa wasn’t explicitly defending itself. However, one can say that Lufthansa implicitly tried to realign image and culture/vision more implicitly in this last period, i.e. the fact that Lufthansa changed its policies on how many people should be in the cockpit.

As deduced, the group followed a somewhat inconsistent overall crisis communication strategy in addition to the inconsistency with e.g. updating colors on social media. As previously solidified, Coombs (2006, p. 149) and Lukaszewski (1998, p. 11-12) generally posit that inconsistency is not preferable in times of crisis. However, one should not draw the conclusion that Lufthansa simply voided this rule. Saying that Lufthansa had carte blanche to be inconsistent in their communication would be unfitting, yet it is important to remember that theoretical recommendations are not perfect models of the real world. Lufthansa was not responsible for the investigation of the crash (BEA, 2015). Hence, one could argue that some inconsistency must have been expected, as seen in contrast to a hypothetical case in which the organization in question could personally investigate the given incident.

**Empirical Reflections**

It is fitting to introduce empirical data so as to holistically assess the crisis communication. As pointed out, one of the goals of SCCT is to avoid negative behavioral intentions following a crisis, i.e. stakeholders severing ties with the organization (Coombs, 2007, p. 166-169). In connection with the latter, a clear goal for Lufthansa was inevitably to realign its image and culture/vision with customers. Based on growing passenger numbers, as indicated by comparing passenger numbers for Q2/Q1 2015 and Q2/Q1 2014 (Lufthansa, 2015i, p. i & Lufthansa, 2015j, p. i), customers did not largely severe their ties with the organization, and one can presume that customers have felt that Lufthansa’s communication was sufficient in
realigning image, culture, and vision. Likewise, while dropping immediately at the time of the crash, Lufthansa’s stock increased at the time of the Q1 report being released, implying, at least somewhat, that Lufthansa was sufficient in engaging instrumentally with its shareholders (Lufthansa, 2015j, p. 2). Determining causal links for the latter two arguments are outside the scope of this paper, but the two examples do, to some degree, solidify the sufficient nature of the crisis communication.

Assessing empirical data on how satisfied the next of kin have been is difficult with the paper’s limitation period, seeing that compensation proceedings will likely take a long time. Likewise, assessing the reputational impact of the crisis is difficult, owing to the fact that reputation is a long-term construct as opposed to image, and that the case is relatively contemporary at the time of this paper’s writing.

**Synthesis**

From the discussion above it becomes clear that evaluating the extent to which Lufthansa’s communication was sufficient is a multifaceted topic. Lufthansa indicated an awareness of having to interact with multiple stakeholders so as to avoid communicational blind spots, generally utilized e.g. Twitter in a fitting way, and recognized the importance of different stakeholders at different times. However, their communication seemed insufficient vis-a-vis a slow response and avoidance in responding to criticism on social media in the form of Twitter. This insufficiency furthered by the fact that Lufthansa’s communication was characterized by being inconsistent and lacked a clear indication of the group’s responsibility. However, as pointed out, such negative arguments can occasionally be rebutted, and Lufthansa’s communication largely complied with the recommendations of SCCT after a number of days. As seen, current empirical reflections indicate a level of sufficiency in the response, but as further empirical data becomes apparent over the coming years, this might change. Nevertheless, from a theoretical communication perspective one could fittingly posit that Lufthansa’s communicational response was, to a large extent, well-executed and sufficient.
Conclusion

In conclusion, the crash of flight 9525 did not pose an easy task for Lufthansa. The crash was a crisis that required immediate communication with important stakeholders such as next of kin, customers, the media, and shareholders, albeit with different urgency. Lufthansa’s vision, culture, and image mix was to some degree misaligned by the crisis which, according to our analysis, was somewhat framed as Lufthansa’s responsibility.

While Lufthansa’s overall crisis communication strategy was varied, inconsistent, and at times clashed with SCCT, all things considered, it comes across, as per our evaluation, as increasingly sufficient within the timeframe. Likewise, while communication on Twitter was not without its flaws, our analysis and discussion imply that Lufthansa successfully leveraged many of the facets of Twitter, thus adding to the sufficiency of its crisis communication. Despite a slow initial response, one clear advantage which furthered this sufficiency of Lufthansa’s communication was its prioritization. As pointed out, the group waited to explicitly engage instrumentally with primary stakeholders such as shareholders till after victims, i.e. next of kin, were ‘taken care of’. This lives up to many of Lukaszewski dimensions, and also argued in the discussion, Lufthansa’s communication with stakeholders and customers lived up to a presumed goal of realigning the gap between image and vision/culture that emerged following the crisis. Hence, while there were flaws indicating lessons to be learned, per our analysis and discussion, Lufthansa’s crisis communication, and herein its use of Twitter as well as its communication with important stakeholders, comes across as largely sufficient.

One must remember that much of our discussion and analysis has been based on theory and various models. While we have tried to add empirical reflections to determine the actual sufficiency, the contemporary nature of the crisis means that only time will tell if our evaluation, per communication literature, is voracious.
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Deutsche Welle.


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Germanwings [germanwings]. (2015b, March 24). Lufthansa and Germanwings have established a telephone hotline. The toll-free 0800 11 33 55 77 number is available to all the families. Retrieved November 21, 2015 from https://twitter.com/germanwings/status/580397643798560768


Appendices

Appendix 1:
Appendix 2:

Appendix 3:

Appendix 4:

Table 1: SCCT crisis types by crisis clusters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Victim cluster: In these crisis types, the organization is also a victim of the crisis.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Weak attributions of crisis responsibility = Mild reputational threat)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural disaster: Acts of nature damage an organization such as an earthquake.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rumor: False and damaging information about an organization is being circulated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace violence: Current or former employee attacks current employees onsite.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product tampering/Malevolence: External agent causes damage to an organization.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Accidental cluster: In these crisis types, the organizational actions leading to the crisis were |
| unintentional.                                                                                 |
| (Minimal attributions of crisis responsibility = Moderate reputational threat)                 |
| Challenges: Stakeholders claim an organization is operating in an inappropriate manner.        |
| Technical-error accidents: A technology or equipment failure causes an industrial accident.    |
| Technical-error product harm: A technology or equipment failure causes a product to be recalled.|

| Preventable cluster: In these crisis types, the organization knowingly placed people at risk, took |
| inappropriate actions or violated a law/regulation.                                           |
| (Strong attributions of crisis responsibility = Severe reputational threat)                    |
| Human-error accidents: Human error causes an industrial accident.                              |
| Human-error product harm: Human error causes a product to be recalled.                         |
| Organizational misdeed with no injuries: Stakeholders are deceived without injury.             |
| Organizational misdeed management misconduct: Laws or regulations are violated by management.  |
| Organizational misdeed with injuries: Stakeholders are placed at risk by management and injuries occur. |

Appendix 5:

Table 23.2  Crisis response strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denial crisis response</td>
<td>Denial: managers claim that no crisis occurred.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attack the accuser: managers confront the person or group that claims the organization is in a crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scapegoat: managers blame some outside person or group for the crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diminish crisis response</td>
<td>Excuse: managers minimize the organization’s responsibility for the crisis by denying any intent to do harm and/or claiming an inability to control events that led to the crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Justification: managers minimize the perceived damage caused by the crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebuild crisis response</td>
<td>Compensation: managers offer money or other gifts to victims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apology: managers accept responsibility for the crisis and ask stakeholders to forgive them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolstering crisis response strategies</td>
<td>Reminder: managers tell stakeholders about past good works of the organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ingratiation: managers thank stakeholders and/or praise stakeholders for their help during the crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Victim image: managers remind stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis as well.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 6:

Appendix 7:

Appendix 8:

Source: Germanwings [germanwings]. (2015, March 30). @vic21081 From the UK you can also use the telephone hotline 0800 014 8904. HL [Tweet Series]. Retrieved November 30, 2015 from: https://twitter.com/germanwings/status/582475229320089600
Appendix 9:

Source: Germanwings [germanwings]. (2015, March 26). @geof24 Out of respect for loved ones, we ask the public to refrain from posting names. Thank you for your cooperation and your sympathy. [Tweet Series]. Retrieved November 30, 2015 from https://twitter.com/germanwings/status/581056160435953665
Appendix 10:

Source: Germanwings [germanwings]. (2015, March 26). @newsbellglobal out of respect for loved ones, we ask you to refrain from posting names/pictures. Thanks for your cooperation & your sympathy [Tweet Series]. Retrieved November 30, 2015 from https://twitter.com/germanwings/status/581092626830630912

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