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Citation

Dalfsen, F. van, Harmes, S., Mensel, L., Schavemaker, P., & Veldhuijzen van Zanten, F. (2010). Airplane disasters and communication crises. *Bestuurskundige Berichten*, 25(1), 12-15. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3211867>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3211867>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Airplane disasters and communication crises

Communication is crucial with regard to managing crises. This article is a short version of a paper that analysed the development of crisis communication within the aviation industry in the Netherlands by investigating four different cases, i.e. the KLM crash at Tenerife in 1977, the El Al crash at the Bijlmermeer in Amsterdam in 1992, the Martinair crash at Faro in 1992, and the Turkish Airlines crash at Schiphol in 2009.

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When a Turkish Airlines plane crashed outside of Amsterdam's Schiphol airport in early 2009, the media swiftly moved in to cover the developments. All major national and international news networks quickly picked up the story and many began broadcasting live footage of the crashed airplanes to audiences around the world. When official statements were made about the incident, coverage quickly exposed these as vague and contradictory to the actual crisis that had unfolded.

This example illustrates one of the challenges confronting contemporary crisis communication: Due to advances in communications technology, high media adoption rates, and channel diversity, the coverage of news events in the media has become virtually instantaneous. While there has been an observable increase in the speed and accuracy of contemporary event portrayal in the media, this has also led to a changing environment within which organizations communicate about information concerning crises with their stakeholders. Faced with the present day media coverage and audience expectations, communication needs to happen quickly and strategically in order to ensure transparency and to yield to pressures of responsiveness.

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In order to guide the communication process, Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2007) identified ten practical lessons for effective crisis communication. For the purpose of this paper, we have drafted five relevant lessons based on and along the lines of propositions of Ulmer et al. (2007). These lessons are briefly outlined below.

Table - Lessons A to E	
Lesson	Objective
Lesson A	Communication
Lesson B	Information
Lesson C	Ambiguity
Lesson D	Self-efficacy
Lesson E	Future

Lesson A regarding communication suggests that it should be started as early as possible whilst maintaining contact with the public, despite any possible scarcity of information (Ulmer et al., 2007, p. 42). Communication also implies being responsive to questions and accepting comments, remarks etc. (Seeger, Sellnow and Ulmer, 2003 p. 73). The authors claim that by doing so, there would be a higher chance of ensuring control over a situation whilst remaining in close contact with stakeholders. Ogrizek and Guillery (1999, p. 57) mention that crisis communication should additionally “respond immediately to accusations and confusion”, as a “crisis event is never short of rumours, doubts and accusations”. Such negative publicity could develop a detrimental potential for the organization, unless handled immediately. In order to prevent such effects, it would therefore be more practical to explain the situation directly (Ogrizek and Guillery, 1999).

Lesson B, information, recommends taking care of the communicated degree of certainty when providing information. If the provided information turned out to be incorrect, projecting certainty during official statements could entail negative effects for the organization's credibility later on. Furthermore, organizations that distribute information in a timely and efficient manner are better able to address concerns raised by the stakeholders involved (Seeger et al., 2003, p. 73). Ogrizek and Guillery (1999, p. 54) agree that it is imperative to “anticipate the medium term”. In other words, it is essential to consider that the crisis situation

may take a turn in its development and therefore one needs to make sure that the given information will remain justifiable.

Lesson C, about ambiguity, is linked to Lesson B; by entailing that organizations should be careful not to overly reassure the public about possible effects of the crisis. Similarly as in Lesson B, quick over-reassurance could lead to issues for the organization in the long term, which might exacerbate the impact of crisis on the organization, rather than alleviating it (Ulmer et al., 2007, pp. 43-44). Therefore, it would be wise to ensure a certain degree of ambiguity in the publicly shared information. While such strategic ambiguity might appear to be misleading, it is nevertheless employed in order to avoid raising false hopes among the public (Seeger et al., 2003, p. 74).

Lesson D, self-efficacy, deals with providing information that is actually useful for the public. Provided information should include cues on how the public could cope with the crisis' effects, such as 'do-it-yourself' measures could quickly be taken. This would force the public to deal with possible undesired consequences of the crisis in order to further prevent or already remedy negative effects (Ulmer et al, 2007, pp. 44-45). Ogrizek and Guillery (1999) recommend being proactive towards the public. Offering “measures of protection just when the emotion of the incident is at its peak” gives members of the public the feeling of being taken care of and that the organization is committed to get the situation under control (Ogrizek and Guillery, 1999, p. 58).

Lastly, Lesson E regarding future advises to stress possible positive future effects related to the crisis. This means that by addressing possible reforms or changes in process routines etc., an organization can display willingness to learn from the crisis and adapt their action in the future (Ulmer et al., 2007, pp. 45-46).

This paper hypothesized that, in the case of airline accidents, the first three lessons will be especially relevant. Providing information and ensuring that that information is provided in the right setting will be crucial for the organizations involved in dealing with the effects of crisis. Similar importance would also have to be paid to the fifth lesson, as a future-oriented outlook is projected to underlie all communication efforts. The fourth lesson, regarding the self-efficacy of the public, is less applicable in this case but has nevertheless been analysed.

Summary and Comparison

The analysis indicated that the aforementioned framework of lessons was certainly visible in many respects across the cases consulted. However, the

extent to which it was followed successfully differed considerably from case to case, resulting in an erratic pattern of crisis communication.

“It is hardly surprising that all players involved could have been more aware of the effects of their statements on the public.”

The case concerning the crash on Tenerife exposes the greatest failures in communication. In part due to the circumstances, messages were delayed, frequently contradictory and unintentionally ambiguous, resulting in great uncertainty for all of those affected. As such, the authorities particularly failed to follow lesson A and B. However, one should bear in mind that the communication methods at the time of the crisis were much less sophisticated than today. It also needs to be taken into account that the study of crisis communication did not even emerge before the late 1980s (Ulmer et al, 2007, 33). This means that theoretical and practical thinking about effective crisis communication was far less developed in the late 1970s. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that all players involved could have been more aware of the effects of their statements on the public and on a positive outcome of the overall crisis.

Nevertheless, the case of the Bijlmer crash, taking place fifteen years later, showed similar features. While the communication was relatively swift and accurate, it excluded several important cues necessary for the public to understand the entire scope of the crisis. For example, the authorities failed to be sufficiently responsive. Moreover, the information with regard to the cause





of the crash and the number of casualties remained uncertain as a result of inaccurate information.

Therefore, lesson A was only partly followed, whereas the authorities failed to address lesson B. However, lesson D on self-efficacy was followed very well. A phone hotline was set up for all questions concerning the crash, the mayor rapidly provided for a crisis centre in a nearby sports facility and within several days after the crash the local government of Amsterdam promised new houses and furniture to all people that had been rendered homeless by the crash.

“The case of the crash at Faro stands out due to the relatively small amount of attention it received.”

The case of the crash at Faro stands out due to the relatively small amount of attention it received. While this may have been due to the fact that the crash occurred within a few weeks of the Bijlmer accident and the direct blame on the poor weather conditions, its coverage was nevertheless weak in comparison to the other cases. This reflects stakeholders' proactive

behaviour and success in quickly assigning blame to the weather conditions thereby avoiding further discussion of the crisis' cause. The main mistakes were related to lesson B and C. Firstly, a spokesperson for the governor of the Algarve misinformed the Associated Press of the death toll almost immediately after the crash. Secondly, Martinair was so concerned in protecting its brand name that it eventually fuelled rumours itself. While continuously assuring its stakeholders that it was not a human-error, the media began to speculate about the situation in more detail.

A similar outcome was visible in the case of the Turkish Airlines flight, which crashed at Schiphol. Following initial controversy about the quick, unjustified claim by Turkish authorities that there had been no casualties, further communication was mostly fact-based and attention to the case quickly died down. Therefore, the first three lessons were largely followed; only lesson B was not entirely addressed as the Turkish authorities initially claimed that there were no casualties.

Lesson D and E did not particularly apply to the Turkish Airlines crash.

Conclusion

In this paper, we attempted to trace communication behaviour of stakeholders in airplane disasters, in order

to observe lessons learned over the years and find a possible correlation between historical communication failures and subsequent action. While the small number of cases in this analysis limits our ability to draw entirely valid conclusions, we are nevertheless able to make inferences about overall trends visible in the research.

“The evolution of communication caused a major paradigm shift in the way and speed in which messages are broadcasted and received by the public.”

Firstly, it became visible that the evolution of communication and information technology over the years caused a major paradigm shift in the way and speed in which messages are broadcasted and received by the public. The harshest contrast is visible between the Tenerife crash in 1977 and the crash of a Turkish Airlines plane, 32 years later. While communication in the previous case was severely limited due to technological constraints, resulting in great uncertainty, the latter case is an example of how word of the crash quickly spread on the Internet, with eyewitnesses giving account of their observations in real-time through a popular micro-blogging service. It is thus crucial to take into account the increased overall visibility and prominence of crises, which have forced stakeholders to acknowledge previously unknown facts at unprecedented speeds. Also, uncertainty about the actual event right after its occurrence seems to fuel the public interest, resulting in greater pressures on stakeholders to communicate. Other societal trends certainly also exerted considerable pressure, such as publicly-conducted in-depth investigations, competition between airlines, customer's increased awareness of crashes and communication due to broader information availability through channels such as the internet.

Indeed, we were able to observe an overall move of stakeholders towards care in communication. Naturally, organizations strive to avoid admitting a fault before being absolutely certain about it; yet outright dismissal of responsibility has in most cases been replaced by a vague admittance of uncertainty about the events, which effectively delays any claims to fault.

References

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Secondly, we observed a much greater reluctance to inform the general public about the definitive circumstances of a crisis if the information about it was not yet certain. While this enwrapped the Bijlmer crash in a tight layer of secrecy, it hardly conducted to an assured and informed general public. It prevented misinforming the public as in the other cases observed; a lesson reflected by the works of Ulmer et al. (2007).

While communication has therefore gained in sophistication, and the messages we observe today commonly seem much more thought-out than a few years ago, shortcomings still arise, often due to the many actors engaging in the communication. This makes any organization vulnerable to the side effects of conflicting messages and can severely jeopardize the integrity and trustworthiness of the communicating entities. Future communication strategies should thus take into account the proverbial 'problem of many hands' and attempt to manage a common approach.

It has also been observed that the events with less attention and overall coverage, in our analysis the crashes of Turkish Airlines at Schiphol and the Martinair crash at Faro, communication was much more successful in so far as that major controversies were quickly dealt with and further uncertainty avoided. It might therefore be concluded that the level of societal impact a crash has in terms of shock and immediateness might lead to a much more difficult situation to be rectified by communication.

Overall, however, our findings suggest that while crisis communication has been changing, it is still far from fully reaching the complete strategic scope suggested by Ulmer et al. The causal mechanism we expected to observe is thus unfulfilled and cannot be fully confirmed. As all the consulted cases diverged from a clear line of development, we find ourselves unable to draw solid conclusions. Instead, we believe that the pressures entailed by technological advance, intensified societal expectations and plain common sense might have been the main cause for a rethinking in crisis communication. It is our opinion that future research will be necessary in order to clarify this suspected correlation. ■