

# **Shitstorms:**

## **Challenging traditional crisis communication theories**

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## Abstract

This study wants to evaluate on whether or not the traditional theories on crisis communication *Image Repair Theory* by William Benoit and *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* by W. Timothy Coombs can be used for handling the phenomenon *shitstorm*, or if they need further development. This will be done by taking a closer look at the phenomenon that is birthed from the internet and social media, through an analysis of the communicative actions of two cases of organizations who experienced a shitstorm.

This theory-discussing study is built around a case study of Volkswagens emission scandal, and United Airlines so called “re-accommodation” of passenger David Dao, comparing their crisis strategies to those of Coombs’ Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Benoit’s Image Restoration Theory, in order to evaluate if and where the crisis communication strategies failed in countering the shitstorms.

The analysis shows that shitstorms brings on new challenges, that have otherwise not been as relevant during a traditional crisis, as the stakeholders get a bigger influence on the organization. The new demands from stakeholders in the shape of fast responses and open communication, means that failing in acknowledging these demands can lead to a shitstorm, which will make the crisis even worse. Choosing an improper communication strategy will then further strengthen the shitstorm, making it even harder to counter it. Because of social media, the response time should be very quick, as social media has increased the demand for information by stakeholders. Failing to meet this requirement can lead to the crisis being controlled by rumors and misinformation, which will be harder to address. The analysis shows that traditional theories of crisis communication can be used to fight a shitstorm, however it also reveals places where the theories are lacking, because of the new aspects that shitstorms brings along.

The paper therefore argues, that while the traditional theories are usable in countering a shitstorm, there are certain places, such as response times, viewing the crisis from the perspective of the stakeholders, and addressing memes, that a crisis manager must be aware of, and that the theories require further development to fully counter a shitstorm because of their focus on the mechanics of a crisis, rather than focusing on the mechanics of the stakeholders who perceive the shitstorm.

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## Introduction:

”Crisis communication is a relatively young discipline born of a need to address very real problems”<sup>1</sup> W. Timothy Coombs argues, and with the rise of social media, the increasing presence of companies, organizations, and people on social media platforms, the relevance of crisis communication has become increasingly important, as information have become more easily accessible for stakeholders. As information becomes easier to obtain, it is harder for companies to control the flow of information, since stakeholders can share information with each other, instead of sharing it with the companies. This new way of communicating means that just one critical post on Facebook or twitter can go viral, spreading throughout the online community, which can then get noticed by more traditional media, like news-organizations, and become part of the consciousness of the public.

It is therefore just as, if not more, important than ever that organizations prepare for how they want handle a crisis. Coombs argues that “a crisis is unpredictable but not unexpected”<sup>2</sup>, emphasizing that that a company cannot jut handle a crisis while it happens, but should see a crisis as something inevitable and integral to running a business. Definitions of a crisis is in an organizational context are plentiful, however, as this paper focuses partly on Coombs Situational Crisis Communication Theory, the definition by Coombs that “A crisis is defined here as a significant threat to operations that can have negative consequences if not handled properly”<sup>3</sup>.

When the crisis, that might have started as a single post on a social media platform, occurs and reaches the printers of a newspaper, or their online pendant, it will very often be described as a “shitstorm”, which describes how an organization is met with a large and negative attention on social media. The violent nature of a shitstorm means that organizations have to adapt to their communication on their social platforms and how they as an organization respond to criticism before it becomes damaging to the organization. This concept of shitstorms will be further defined in the theoretical chapter of this assignment.

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<sup>1</sup> Coombs, W. Timothy. *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2015. P 186

<sup>2</sup> Coombs, W. Timothy. *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2015. P 3

<sup>3</sup> Coombs, W. Timothy. "Crisis Management and Communications." *Institute for Public Relations*, December 2007, 1-17. Accessed February 25, 2018.

- Purpose and Problem statement

The concept of shitstorms and its increasing importance have led to my interest to look into the subject. This paper will look into the characteristics of a shitstorm, how it differs from a traditional crisis in order to investigate if the crisis theories of Coombs and Benoit can be applied in an online context, or if they are lacking. This is done to better understand how a shitstorm should be handled, but also to give a better understanding of what it is, and through that, make it easier to navigate through the storm.

This focus leads to the problem statement:

“In what way did the Volkswagen and United airlines cases use crisis communication strategies resembling those of SCCT and Image Restoration Theory, and how are shitstorms as an online phenomenon challenging these traditional theories?”

- Delimitations

- International Context

Being aware that a shitstorm has no geographical boundaries and can happen to anyone, at any place and at any time, and the fact that the study demands an international context for the paper, this paper will frame its analysis within two cases, that, even though they mostly happened within a national context, still had an impact internationally. The two companies chosen reached outside of the boundaries of which it happened, and created worldwide awareness of the crisis.

- Relevant platforms for analysis

The social media platforms chosen for this analysis is limited to Facebook and Twitter, mainly because of their popularity.

Facebook has more than 2.2 billion monthly active users<sup>4</sup>, while Twitter, with its more modest 330 million active users<sup>5</sup>, has a very efficient search engine through its hashtags that can be used to create a better picture of how people reacted at the peak of the crisis.

## Theoretical framework

### Defining shitstorm

The term “shitstorm” did not get its name directly from channels like the news or from academic papers, but was birthed during the European web 2.0 conference “re:publica” in 2010 by blogger

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<sup>4</sup> "Number of Facebook Users Worldwide 2008-2018 | Statistic." Statista. Accessed March 12, 2018. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Twitter MAU Worldwide 2018 | Statistic." Statista. Accessed March 12, 2018. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/282087/number-of-monthly-active-twitter-users/>.

Sascha Lobo who defined it as “an online phenomenon, in which, during a short period of time, a - subjectively perceived - huge number of critical remarks are being made, and these remarks are at least partly detached from the original critique but instead are mostly aggressive, offensive, threatening or somehow attacking.”, thereby arguing that a shitstorms needs a level of seriousness, or violence, before it can be characterized as such. The popularity of the name has likely been furthered by politicians such as Angela Merkel, who first used it in 2012 during a discussion in Berlin with David Cameron, and the acceptance of the word in the German dictionary ”Duden”<sup>6</sup>. As Lobo is a blogger, the definition is not based on anything academical and is a subjective definition without any real theoretical data to back it up, it does not necessarily qualify as a valid definition in an academical context, and therefore needs some theoretical backing to give the term more validity, as this, because of it originating from Lobo, is the definition that this paper will be using.

Jeffrey Pfeffer et al has done some research on a similar term to shitstorms called “Online firestorms” which shares similarities with the term that Lobo has coined. Pfeffer defines it as “the sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative WOM and complaint behavior against a person, company, or group in social media networks. In these messages, intense indignation is often expressed, without pointing to an actual specific criticism.”<sup>7</sup>, which is practically the same framework, as the one used by Lobo, who also argues that the criticism is often aggressive and without any specificity, however adding to it by further explaining that “these instant waves of criticism that appear without warning can have a huge impact on a company’s or a brand’s reputation”, acknowledging that it can have a huge impact on the one facing the firestorm. One addition that is worth mentioning, is that Lobos states that the number of critical remarks is subjective, which is important, as it acknowledges that the amount of criticism has to be compared with the reach of the organization.

Lobo’s term of “shitstorms” and Pfeffer et al’s “Online firestorm” are rather similar and therefore comparable, as both argue that the duration of the crisis and the negative word of mouth has to reach a large amount to be categorized as such, this paper will consider the two as different terms for the same concept. However, evaluating the popularity of Lobo’s term, by using Google

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<sup>6</sup> Connolly, Kate. "Shitstorm Arrives in German Dictionary." The Guardian. July 04, 2013. Accessed March 15, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/jul/04/shitstorm-german-dictionary-duden-shitschturm>.

<sup>7</sup> Pfeffer, J., T. Zorbach, and K. M. Carley. "Understanding online firestorms: Negative word-of-mouth dynamics in social media networks." Journal of Marketing Communications 20, no. 1-2 (2013): 117-28. Accessed March 15, 2018. doi:10.1080/13527266.2013.797778.

Trends, shows that worldwide, the term shitstorm has a much larger search interest over time, as well as a larger news search, compared to the search term “online firestorms”, which is almost non-existent in both categories, and therefore not nearly as popular as the term “shitstorm”<sup>8</sup>. Combining this with the fact that both in the Danish and German dictionaries have included “shitstorm” as a term, points towards the familiarity of the term “shitstorm”, which as a result, will be the term used for this paper.

### Why shitstorms and social media is relevant

The traditional platforms for communication, such as television, radio and newspapers, have been a way for shareholders, the organizations, to use marketing tools to control the flow of information that stakeholders, the consumers, were given, and a handy tool for crisis communication. However, with the invention and continuous popularity of the internet, the platforms for communication have been changed, as it has given shareholders the possibility of reaching a far greater crowd than by traditional platforms, and with the analytical tools given by social media organizations, the added possibility of reaching a very specific group of stakeholders. What differs the most from the traditional platforms, is the fact that it is no longer the shareholder, who is the main beneficiary to the content and experiences that the shareholders will receive, but rather the stakeholder, who through reviews, posts, tagging etc. can share, participate and create experiences, that the organizations have little to no control of. The stakeholder has been given a voice, that through traditional platforms was reserved for the few, and the power have been given to the consumers, as shareholders have to be addressing them in their need, rather than deciding what needs they have through advertising.

Another important difference from traditional media and social media, is social medias ability to go viral, meaning that it can start as a small crisis between one customer and the company in question, but then get caught on by other stakeholders who have had similar experiences or share the frustration of the original customer, escalating further and becoming a topic of discussion for people who were otherwise unaware of the situation. An example could be Copenhagen Zoo’s choice of euthanizing a giraffe, which was nothing out of the ordinary for a zoo to do, however some people complained, it caught on and ended up as a shitstorm, a crisis that Copenhagen Zoo suddenly had to deal with. The virality is clear in this example, as it changed from becoming a

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<sup>8</sup> ”Firestorm, Shitstorm”. Gogle Trends. <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2009-01-02%202018-05-28&q=Firestorm,Shitstorm>

small amount of people in Denmark who disagreed with the zoo's choice, to a highly discussed topic that was reached beyond the borders of Denmark, such as in Britain, where the scientific director of the zoo, Bengt Holst, had to discuss the topic on Channel 4<sup>9</sup>, and in Spain where people would protest against it.

This new way of communication is clearly shown when dealing with shitstorms, and is why it is relevant to address the difference between traditional platforms and social media, when analyzing shitstorms. A shitstorm is something that a shareholder wants to avoid, as it seldom brings anything good along for the company, hence the name, but is a stakeholder-created tool that is very useful, when an issue occurs, that the shareholder might not want to work with, if it can be avoided. Being stakeholder-created, means that the shareholders have no control of what consumers say on their social media pages and it is out of their control. There is of course some control, as the shareholder can delete comments and posts that have had a negative reaction, however this may escalate the crisis. They can also disable comments, however this will mean that the shareholder has a poorer understanding of what the stakeholders' issues are and they have no possibility of doing direct damage control with the stakeholders. This is a clear indication that the power has switched to the hand of the stakeholders.

The theories of Benoit and Coombs were made before the internet and social media, originating from a time where traditional platforms were the tool for crisis communication, however both theorists do not address the platform for which their theories should be used, and it is therefore likely that they assume that they can be used for all platforms. However, as it did not exist at the time, it is relevant to investigate if their theories are still applicable, not only because of a new platform, but also because there has been a change in power, the way that the communication is distributed and the volatile movement that "going viral" can cause.

## Memes

A relatively new cultural subject that social media has given birth to is *Memes*, a way of sharing information on social media through jokes, which comes in many shapes and sizes, be it pictures, videos or GIFs. These memes are easy to share, easy to understand and short, and are because of this very likely to go viral, being seen by many people online. The idea of memes can be seen as

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<sup>9</sup> Laugesen, Maria. "Zoo-direktør forsvarer giraf-drab for oprørt tv-vært" TV2. February 11, 2014. Accessed April 20, 2018. <http://nyheder.tv2.dk/samfund/2014-02-11-zoo-direktoer-forsvarer-giraf-drab-for-oproert-tv-vaert>



social medias counterpart to the classic monologues performed by talkshow hosts such as David Letterman, in which the host covers an often serious subject in a humorous, quick and nonchalant way.

Merriam-Webster describes a meme as “an idea, behavior, style or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture”, a neologism coined by Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist. The meme acts as a unit that carries these ideas and behaviors from one person’s mind to another’s mind, a sort of cultural analogue. Because of this new way of sharing information has become so popular, and because it can be used to interpret on human reactions, it will be used in this paper as it uses the interpretivist approach, which aims at understanding behavior and perception through the interpretation of actions and words.

### Situational Crisis Communication Theory by Coombs

Developed by W. Timothy Coombs, professor in communication studies, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) argues that crisis managers should adapt their crisis strategy to the level of responsibility and the type of crisis that the organization poses, creating a unique solution for each crisis that takes the situation and the context into consideration, in order to create the strategy that will protect the organization’s image best. Coombs looks at a crisis as having two stages. Each of these stages are intended to make the best possible guidelines for the most efficient crisis response.

#### Stage one: Identifying crisis type and intensifying factors

The first stage is where the organization identifies the crisis type, the intensifying factors, such as crisis history, and thereby also the threat that the crisis poses. The first step, within stage one is to identify the crisis type. SCCT identifies three ”crisis clusters”, or crisis types, with their own unique attributions and applicable situations: The victim cluster, where the organization is perceived as the victim and therefore not responsible for the cause of crisis, making the reputational threat low, the accidental cluster, where the organization is the reason for the crisis, but has done it without any intention of foul play and viewed as accidental by stakeholders, making the reputational threat moderate, and the intentional cluster where the organization is the sole reason for the crisis and bears all of the responsibility, making the reputational threat high.

The second step, after identifying the crisis type, is to identify the intensifying factors, in which it is important to look at the crisis history of the organization. Coombs presents the terms “velcro-

effect” and “Halo-effect”. The Velcro-effect defined by Coombs as “Organizations with a history of crises attract additional reputational damage just as Velcro attracts lint”<sup>10</sup> argues that if the organization has a prior list of crises or an unfavorable prior reputation, it is plausible that stakeholders will hold the organization more responsible, than it would, if it was the first crisis that the organization was presented with, thereby having an indirect influence on the reputational threat. The results of a bad reputation or prior crisis history, the crisis type will move up one level meaning that stakeholders will treat a victim cluster as if it was an accidental cluster, and an accidental cluster like an intentional cluster.

The Halo-effect argues that If the organization has a very good reputation, this will have a positive effect on the reputational damage, but although it might reduce the reputational threat, it will not protect the organization against it, and it is argued that it only works for organizations that have a very favorable view in the eyes of the stakeholders, and that there is no reason to believe that it will lower the reputational threat<sup>11</sup>.

One example where crisis history had an influence, is the case of Denmark and the jewelry law, a case that became a worldwide topic of discussion. Denmark had previously been criticized for its strict immigration laws, and therefore a prior reputation, but criticism had been minor, until the point of making a law that made it possible for border control to confiscate valuable possessions of asylum seekers. Because of the governments prior immigration-restrictions, the criticism escalated, as this was not the first time that the Danish government proposed a controversial law.

## Stage two: Crisis Response

Having identified the crisis type, the reputational threat, and the crisis history and reputation of the organization, it is now time to move onto stage two, which is to establish a proper response strategy. SCCT provides a theoretically founded base for their response strategy, in which Coombs have found four primary responses to a crisis in SCCT. These four response strategies are *denial*, *diminishment*, *rebuilding* and *bolstering* and within these four strategies are several sub-tactics<sup>12</sup>.

The denial strategy’s goal is to remove any correlation between the organization and the crisis, because if the organization is not involved in the crisis it will have no repercussions, thereby not

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<sup>10</sup> Coombs, W. Timothy. "Velcro Effect." In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Corporate Reputation*, edited by Craig E. Carroll, 890. Thousand Oaks,, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2016. doi: 10.4135/9781483376493.n327.

<sup>11</sup> Coombs, W. Timothy. "Halo Effect." In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Corporate Reputation*, edited by Craig E. Carroll, 337-339. Thousand Oaks,, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2016. doi: 10.4135/9781483376493.n135.

<sup>12</sup> Coombs, W. Timothy. "Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory." *Corporate Reputation Review* 10, no. 3 (2007): P 170

damaging the organization. Within the denial strategy, there are three sub-tactics. The first is *denial*, where one simply denies that there is a crisis. Then there is the choice to *attack the accuser*, by confronting the people, medias or organizations that are claiming that something is wrong within the accused organization. An example of this is the use of force, such as a lawsuit against the accuser. Finally, there is *scapegoating*, where the organization blames someone outside of the organization for the crisis.

The diminishing strategy's goal is to reduce the seriousness and the harmful effects of the crisis, arguing that it is not as bad as people may think, or that the organization had no control over the crisis. This strategy needs strong evidence in order to work, and if this fails, it is likely because dialogue on various medias dismiss the evidence that the organization brings forward when trying to diminish the crisis, therefore continuing with a different crisis frame as before, instead of one preferred by the organization in a crisis. This strategy has two sub-tactics, the first being to execute an *excuse strategy* where the organization tries to minimize the responsibility that it has for the crisis, with an excuse that can either include denying intention to do harm or claiming that they weren't able to control the events that led to the crisis. The second tactic is to use *justification* in order to minimize the perceived damage that is associated with the crisis, stating that there were no serious damage or injuries to those involved or that the cause justified the means.

The rebuilding strategy aims to rebuild the reputation of the organization by offering materialistic or symbolic aid to the victims, by saying and doing things that are to the benefit of the stakeholder, thereby taking positive actions towards the crisis. This strategy has two sub-tactics, one being *compensation*, where money, gifts or similar is offered to the victims. The second is the *apology*, where the organization simply apologizes, thereby taking full responsibility for the crisis and asks the stakeholders for forgiveness.

The bolstering strategy is used as a supplement to the three previous strategies and to adjust information. The organization can use the bolstering strategy to draw upon possible goodwill that the stakeholders have because of a good relationship between the organization and the stakeholders, to praise the stakeholders or to gain sympathy from the stakeholders by arguing that the organization is being a victim of the crisis.

### Image Restoration Theory by Benoit

Image Restoration theory was developed by William Benoit, and aims to provide strategies that can be used to restore the image of a shareholder, in the case a crisis that have damaged their

reputation. Benoit proposes that there are two fundamental requirements to a crisis<sup>13</sup>: The first requirement demands that “The accused has to be held responsible for an action”, and the second argues that “That act is considered offensive”. These two requirements need to be fulfilled, in order for stakeholders to form an unfavorable opinion of the shareholder. If these are not fulfilled, then there is no risk that the image of the shareholder is threatened, according to Benoit.

The theory proposes five general strategies that can be used: *Denial*, *Evasion of Responsibility*, *Reducing Offensiveness of Events*, *Corrective Action* and *Mortification*<sup>14</sup>.

Both Denial and Evasion of Responsibility address the first component of an attack:

Denial focuses on either denying that any incident has happened, or giving another actor the blame for the incident. Evasion of responsibility comes in four versions, the first being provocation, where the actor can argue that the incident happened as a response to some sort of provocation, in an attempt to legitimize the actions committed. The second version is defeasibility, where the actor argues that they have not been informed, giving lack of information the blame for the incident happening. The third version claims that an incident happens on the basis of an accident, in order to attempt to reduce the responsibility and accountability that may otherwise have been laid upon the actor. The last version speaks to the softer values of stakeholders, arguing that an incident happened with the actors’ intention of doing something good, which in turn makes it seem as if the incident was a good plan gone wrong, a human mistake, which many can relate to.

Reducing Offensiveness of Event, Corrective Action and Mortification all address the second component of an attack: Reducing offensiveness of event is used in an attempt to make actions seem less serious, or offensive, than they are. This strategy has six versions, the first being bolstering, where the accused tries to strengthen the stakeholders’ positive feelings, for example by reminding them of previous good deeds, in order to make it easier for the stakeholders to accept the accused’s wrongdoing. Minimization, as the word suggests, focuses on minimizing the negative feelings, by making the situation seem less serious than it appear. The third, differentiation, compares similar cases that are worse than the action in question, thereby reducing the negative feelings of the stakeholders. Transcendence is the fourth way of reducing offensiveness, in which the act is placed in a broader or more favorable context. A fifth way is to attack the accuser, questioning the credibility of the source that birthed the accusations, in order to reduce damage. The

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<sup>13</sup> Coombs, W. Timothy. "Image Repair Theory." In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Corporate Reputation*, edited by Craig E. Carroll, 344-346. Thousand Oaks,, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2016. doi: 10.4135/9781483376493.n139.

<sup>14</sup> Coombs, W. Timothy. "Image Repair Theory." In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Corporate Reputation*, edited by Craig E. Carroll, 344-346. Thousand Oaks,, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2016. doi: 10.4135/9781483376493.n139.

final version, is compensation, where the accused apologizes and offers some sort of compensation. If this compensation is accepted, the accused's image should be improved.

Another strategy is acknowledging the problem, and promising that the problem will be solved or actions will be made to prevent the problem from happening again. This is called corrective action

The final strategy in image restoration is mortification, where the accused takes full responsibility and begs for forgiveness. This usually appears in some sort of apology, which somewhat like Evasion of responsibility attempts to appeal to the softer values of stakeholders, and if it is a case where a company makes a mistake, attempts to show of the human side of the company.

## Method

### Time period

In order to keep focus on the problem formulation, I have chosen to analyze a specific period of time of this crisis, which is when the crisis first started, and the first reactions from United Airlines and Volkswagen. This paper will therefore not be analyzing the aftermath that the crisis has had on the organizations, as this is not the aim of the paper. The aftermath of the crisis will only be mentioned if it has relevance to the analysis of the organizations crisis communication.

### Case study

This paper uses case studies, which is defined as research that “entails the detailed and intensive analysis of a single case”<sup>15</sup>. The two cases that are used for this paper, will be the basis for the data that is used, along with the chosen theories. The two cases are chosen because of their origin in USA, the way that the news spread to the rest of the world, and because they both happened to large corporations, that not only have a prior reputation in USA, but where it is probable to say that they, because of their size, have a communication department to assist them, and therefore possible for them to utilize the chosen theories. The case design is inspired by my interest in crisis communication on social media, and the complexity of social media that can both gain and hurt organizations. By researching both cases, which have different reasons for their crisis-

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<sup>15</sup> Bryman, Alan. Social Research Methods . 5th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Page 60

emergence, the hope is that it will be possible to see if the traditional theories on crisis communication are still usable in an online context.

The advantages of a case study, is the researchers' ability to focus on specific cases, which allows for a deeper understanding of the case, enabling him to look at the subtleties and complexities of the specific case.

There are also disadvantages to doing case studies as the researcher must be careful with the conclusions that are drawn, as one has to consider if the conclusions are exclusively true for the cases that are examined or if they are generalizable and applicable in other cases as well. Furthermore, the advantage of deep immersion that case studies allow the researcher to have can cause a lack of selectivity, because the researcher might find a bigger amount of data and information interesting, to the extent that it is included in the paper, thereby having the dilemma of which data to exclude and include, risking that the paper becomes too wide and unfocused. Because I will be using the Hermeneutic circle, it is natural to use the interpretive approach as a way of gaining knowledge, and because of the epistemological stance of this paper, the interpretive approach to comparative research, where the focus is to understand behavior and perception through the interpretation of actions and words, matches this papers analytical departure. Interpretivism aims at understanding actions, which is what I will be doing in this paper in which the aim is to understand how the crises occurred, handled and reacted to, in order to investigate how the theories were used or could be used differently, and through these results draw conclusions on whether or not the traditional theories on crisis communication remains relevant in an online context, thereby getting a better understanding on how to use these traditional theories on crisis communication in said context and potential lacking strategies that needs to be remembered when using the theories.

### The hermeneutic circle

As the aim of this paper is to interpret and understand the cases of shitstorms against United Airlines and Volkswagen in order to evaluate the chosen theories on crisis communication, the paper will be based on the interpretivist approach, using the hermeneutic circle as the way of obtaining knowledge. The inspiration for this paper comes from a personal interest in wanting to better understand the dynamics of shitstorms, how crisis communication can be used to handle a shitstorm, and whether or not the traditional theories are applicable, the hermeneutic circle is used because it makes it possible to create interpretation through the use of knowledge a researcher has,

and the knowledge a researcher will obtain throughout the research-process, which will then gradually change the understanding while getting closer to the truth, moving between small parts and the situations from a broader perspective. In this paper, the small parts are the comments on social media and the communicative actions that United Airlines and Volkswagen used in their crisis communication strategies. This approach is relevant, as the aim is not to find one single truth, as the interpretivist approach argues do not exist, since people interpret experiences differently and because there is no single truth, there are also no single truth on how to handle a shitstorm. Instead, the aim is to reach a holistic understanding of possible ways that crisis communication can be used to handle a shitstorm on social media, and whether or not traditional crisis communication theories are still applicable, thereby getting a deeper understanding of what shitstorms are, the effect that they can have on an organization and the ways that an organization can deal with these when using traditional crisis communication theories, which will then make it possible to critique and evaluate the chosen crisis communication theories.

## Data Collection

Typically, the interpretivist approach is used along with the qualitative method of collecting data, which is also the case for the majority of this paper, where the aim is not to quantify data or numbers, but rather gather data that can be used to understanding a social phenomenon and testing theories. This does not exclude quantitative data completely from this paper, as there will be a use of numbers and statistics in this paper, however the quantitative data is used to back the arguments found through the interpretivist approach, and to give the reader a better understanding of the issues that crises poses to the organizations, the importance of being able to handle a crisis, and the relevance of shitstorms in a modern crisis context.

## Netnography

Inspired from the term ethnography, the study of cultures and people, the term netnography focuses on the same, however in an online context. Thanks to the popularity that the internet, computers and smartphones have had in both the professional and private aspects of people's lives, data and knowledge is very accessible. The netnographic research method is therefore a useful tool for this paper, as it helps to better understand how stakeholders reacted on the crises itself and on the crisis responses of the shareholders. One thing that is important to remember, when using netnography, is how easy it is to create fake accounts on social media, that can be used for changing

the direction of the conversation. It is therefore important to look at the validity of the stakeholders, before using their comments in an analysis.

## Primary Data

### Facebook

Facebook is the biggest free social network service, having over 2.1 billion monthly active users worldwide, 1.74 billions of these also access Facebook via smartphones<sup>16</sup>. Initially meant for Harvard users only, it quickly expanded, and is now available for anyone over the age of 13. People can use Facebook for adding friends, message with these friends online, post status updates on what they are up to or thinking about, and what is most relevant for this paper: they can write reviews or complain directly to companies. The advantage of using Facebook for gathering data is because of its extreme popularity. This popularity means that there is a wide variety of opinions on the cases, and with the combinations of likes, reactions and sub-comments, it is possible to evaluate the popularity of the different opinions, thereby giving an overview of the general feelings towards the cases.

This paper will use Facebook as a way of collection data, in the form of screendumps of the reactions towards the cases of United Airlines and Volkswagen, in order to interpret on the stakeholder's general reaction to the cases and the responses that the organizations used during their crisis.

### Twitter

Twitter differs from Facebook, as it limits each tweet to 140 characters, although this limit has recently been raised for some people, which means that users have to be very concise in their wording, which in turn makes it easier and faster to read for eventual recipients. Twitter is also it is extremely impulse-friendly, meaning that users can express a feeling or emotion, that they felt in that specific moment, and because tweets can not be edited, only deleted, it gives an understanding of the feelings that the senders had in the moment in which they wrote their tweet. Furthermore, because of the length of the tweets, it is not seen as spam or an annoyance by others, if one Twitter user produces several tweets each day. The impulsiveness means that content is continuously refreshed, and discussions are very likely to happen often because of this, as it is easy to commence

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<sup>16</sup> "Facebook: Monthly Active Users 2018 | Statistic." Statista. Accessed March 29, 2018.  
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>



a discussion or join someone else's discussion allowing users to share experiences with each other, no matter if they are strangers or friends, which is different from Facebook, where it is mainly possible to comment on public sites and friend's posts.

A key feature of Twitter is the hashtag, which allows people to voice their opinion on a specific topic, creating a room of discussion by filtering out all non-relevant tweets. If a hashtag becomes popular and more people start using the same hashtag, it becomes a trending topic on Twitter, thereby gaining a larger popularity and it becomes more likely that others will join in. The hashtag can be a tool in presenting a certain topic to people who might not have heard about it in other ways, or who is uninterested in reading long news articles, and as each tweet is limited to 140 characters, it is easy to obtain a quick overview of specific cases.

This paper will use Twitter as a way of gathering data, in the form of opinions from those reacting to United Airlines and Volkswagens tweets, and the paper will also show some of the popular hashtags used in these shitstorms, when looking at the impact that the shitstorms have had on the opinions of the stakeholders towards organizations.

## Secondary data

The use of secondary data for this paper, is used to supplement the primary data, as there is a risk that some comments and posts may have been deleted by the two organizations, and therefore hard to find from the original source. By using secondary data from news sources, it enables a more thorough analysis. By using secondary data like the articles, it is possible to see how the media covered the crisis, such as if the writer had a negative opinion on the organization, thereby creating a negative opinion in the readers' minds.

## Analysis

### Cases

#### Case 1: Volkswagen and the diesel-scandal

#### The Company

Volkswagen, also known as VW, is an automaker which was founded in 1937 by the German Labour Front (DAF) under Adolf Hitler, and has since grown into a conglomerate with twelve car brands under its wings called Volkswagen AG, and is the most selling car manufacturer in the

world today<sup>17</sup>. Volkswagen AG's flagship car brand is the Volkswagen, which simply uses its name to as the advertising slogan, as Volkswagen is German for "people's car". Volkswagen AG has 120 production plants around the world, selling to 153 countries and employing more than 642,000 people<sup>18</sup>. On social media, VW has 33.010.666 likes on Facebook, and 113.000 followers on twitter for the Volkswagen AG account. The Twitter accounts for Volkswagen stand-alone car brand is divided up into regions, with their American account having more than 551.000 followers.

### The Crisis

Before the crisis started, Volkswagen had been promoting the diesel-engines heavily in the United States through their advertising and their sustainability reports. Their "Clean Diesel" engine ad campaigns wanted to debunk myths and common preconceptions that Americans had about diesel-powered cars. An example of this was their "Old Wives Tales" ads, in which three elderly women argue about diesel engines being more polluting than their gasoline counterparts, which one of the women proves wrong by holding her expensive scarf near the tailpipe of her new Volkswagen Passat, thereby proving the argument wrong as the scarf keeps being clean<sup>19</sup>. In their sustainability report from 2013 Volkswagen describes themselves in the following matter: "The Volkswagen Group has set itself the goal of becoming the world leader in environmental protection. We will achieve this through resource-efficient production plus a unique, broad-based approach to our powertrain and fuel technology. This will help to conserve resources and shape the mobility of the future."<sup>20</sup>. Combining this statement with the advertisements, shows just why this crisis happened, and why it was received in the manner by the public and the media that will be shown in the following chapter.

In 2014 a group of scientists from West Virginia University conducted a test on three diesel cars. This test found that 2 of 3 diesel cars showed additional emissions when driven on the road, instead of being tested in a test-facility. The cars that did not pass the test were produced by Volkswagen, showing that a VW Jetta exceeded the limits measured by California Air Resources Board" by a factor of 15 to 35" and a VW Passat "by a factor of 5 to 20". Further investigation began, to find out

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<sup>17</sup> "Volkswagen Overtakes Toyota as the World's Biggest Carmaker." BBC News. January 30, 2017. Accessed April 6, 2018. <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-38793253>.

<sup>18</sup> "Portrait & Production Plants." Volkswagen Group Homepage. Accessed April 6, 2018. <https://www.volkswagenag.com/en/group/portrait-and-production-plants.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Ballaban, Michael. "Why Did Volkswagen Delete All Of Its Diesel Ads From YouTube?" Jalopnik. September 21, 2015. Accessed April 7, 2018. <https://jalopnik.com/why-did-volkswagen-delete-all-of-its-diesel-ads-from-yo-1731691453>.

<sup>20</sup> Volkswagen AG. *Sustainability Report 2013*, 2013. P. 84

how it was possible that a live road test showed that big of a difference when compared with a standard laboratory test.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of September of 2015, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) stated that Volkswagen AG had been in violation of the Clean Air Act, a federal law designed to control air pollution in the United States and that approximately 480.000 VW and Audi cars equipped with a 2-litre diesel engine had a defeat device installed, that could tamper with the emissions, when tested in a lab. The defeat device was a string of code that could tell the cars computer when it was being tested, limiting its engine to seem more efficient than it really was, resulting in up to 40 times less pollution than what it pollutes on the road.

This case received widespread negative media exposure and was referred to as an “emission scandal”<sup>21</sup> and “Dieselgate”<sup>22</sup>, thereby creating parallels to the seriousness of the Watergate-scandal and the emission manipulation from VW. With Volkswagen being a respected brand with a mission of focusing on environmental safety according to their CSR reports<sup>23</sup> and advertising<sup>24</sup>, this conflicting reality generated a large amount of news headlines and negative word of mouth and as the media exposure started, so did the shitstorm amongst consumers, who started writing angry posts on Volkswagens social media sites, and criticizing Volkswagen for lying in their advertising. The crisis resulted in Martin Winterkorn resigning as the CEO of Volkswagen, VW shares dropping 23% immediately after<sup>25</sup> and the recall of 11 million vehicles, as well as facing up to 18 billion dollars in fines from the United States Environmental Agency<sup>26</sup>.

## Analysis

The analysis of the strategies that Volkswagen used for their online crisis communication will be based on two statements that VW released after the crisis, the hashtags on twitter and the jokes about VW that followed after the crisis.

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<sup>21</sup> Thompson, Mark, and Ivana Kottasova. "Volkswagen Scandal Widens." CNNMoney. September 22, 2015. Accessed April 8, 2018. <http://money.cnn.com/2015/09/22/news/vw-recall-diesel/index.html>.

<sup>22</sup> "Tag: Dieselgate." POLITICO. Accessed April 8, 2018. <https://www.politico.eu/tag/dieselgate/>.

<sup>23</sup> Volkswagen AG. *Sustainability Report 2013*, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Gareffa, Peter. "Viral Volkswagen Ads Debunk." 2018 Mitsubishi Mirage ES Hatchback: Customize & Price | Edmunds. March 05, 2015. Accessed April 8, 2018. <https://www.edmunds.com/car-news/viral-volkswagen-ads-debunk-old-wives-tales-about-diesels.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Kresge, Naomi, and Richard Weiss. "Volkswagen Drops 23% After Admitting Diesel Emissions Cheat." Bloomberg.com. September 21, 2015. Accessed April 8, 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-09-21/volkswagen-drops-15-after-admitting-u-s-diesel-emissions-cheat>.

<sup>26</sup> Rushe, Dominic. "VW Software Scandal: Chief Apologises for Breaking Public Trust." The Guardian. September 20, 2015. Accessed April 8, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/sep/20/vw-software-scandal-chief-apologises-for-breaking-public-trust>.

On the 20th September of 2015, two days after the EPA had released their statement, a press release statement by the Volkswagen CEO at the time, Martin Winterkorn, in which he apologizes promptly for the incident:

Wolfsburg, 20 September 2015

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## **Statement of Prof. Dr. Martin Winterkorn, CEO of Volkswagen AG:**

**The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the California Air Resources Board (EPA and CARB) revealed their findings that while testing diesel cars of the Volkswagen Group they have detected manipulations that violate American environmental standards.**

The Board of Management at Volkswagen AG takes these findings very seriously. I personally am deeply sorry that we have broken the trust of our customers and the public. We will cooperate fully with the responsible agencies, with transparency and urgency, to clearly, openly, and completely establish all of the facts of this case. Volkswagen has ordered an external investigation of this matter.

We do not and will not tolerate violations of any kind of our internal rules or of the law.

The trust of our customers and the public is and continues to be our most important asset. We at Volkswagen will do everything that must be done in order to re-establish the trust that so many people have placed in us, and we will do everything necessary in order to reverse the damage this has caused. This matter has first priority for me, personally, and for our entire Board of Management.

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This statement is written in an official way, rather than a down to earth and more human way, as some research has otherwise shown to have a positive effect on crisis communication<sup>28</sup>. This is evident from the headline, where it says “Statement of Prof. Dr. Martin Winterkorn, CEO of Volkswagen AG:”. The reason for choosing to do it this way, can be because of the ethos that lies within the title of being a “Prof.” and “Dr.” which makes him seem more trustworthy. The statement then acknowledges that testing had been done on Volkswagens diesel cars, which detected that the engines “violate American environmental standards.”. What was later discovered, was that it was not only American standards that had been broken, but also European and Asian

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<sup>27</sup> Volkswagen AG. "Statement of Prof. Dr. Martin Winterkorn, CEO of Volkswagen AG:." News release, September 20, 2015. <https://www.volkswagen-media-services.com/en/detailpage/-/detail/Statement-of-Prof-Dr-Martin-Winterkorn-CEO-of-Volkswagen-AG/view/2709406/>. Accessed April 10, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Park, Hyojung, and Glen T. Cameron. "Keeping It Real." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 91, no. 3 (2014): 487-507. doi:10.1177/1077699014538827.

standards. The choice of only highlighting the American standards, is similar to the strategy *Reducing Offensiveness* supposed by Benoit, where one uses *minimization* to attempt to convince the stakeholders that the crisis is less serious than it appears. Had they admitted to using a defeat-device on cars all over the world, the news would most likely have blown to bigger proportions, making it harder for Volkswagen to control the information and the angle of the stories being told about the manipulation.

The statement then uses more strategies similar to those of both Combs and Benoit, as they not only acknowledge that VW did something wrong, but also apologizes for what have happened, as well as promising to ensure that such a thing will never happen again. By writing "I personally am very sorry", Winterkorn is taking responsibility as the CEO of the company by speaking on behalf of the company, and using the strategy similar to Benoit's *Mortification* in which the shareholder admits responsibility and asks for forgiveness, whereas it is called *Apology* under the "Rebuild crisis response strategies" by Coombs, which has a similar definition. That Winterkorn and VW is asking for forgiveness is evident as he writes "We at Volkswagen will do everything that must be done in order to re-establish the trust that so many people have placed in us," thereby acknowledging that stakeholders must feel disappointed and angered about the situation, losing their trust in the company. The sentence is continued with "and we will do everything necessary in order to reverse the damage this has caused", which is similar to the strategy *Corrective Action* by Benoit, as the accused (VW) claims that they will correct the problem.

It took 2 days after this statement, a total of 4 days after the beginning of the crisis, before a 2 minute and 30-second video-apology was published on Facebook and the first tweet acknowledging the crisis was sent from the official Volkswagen twitter-profile @vwpress\_en with a link to the same video<sup>29</sup>. It took another four hours before the video-apology was released on their global twitter channel<sup>30</sup>. The US twitter account for Volkswagen did not share this video however, but waited until the 24<sup>th</sup> of September before addressing the crisis. This tweet consisted of the text "Update from Volkswagen regarding the EPA investigation:" along with a picture of a quote by the CEO of Volkswagen Group of America, Michael Horn, rather than a statement by Martin Winterkorn, who was the CEO of the entire Volkswagen Group:

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<sup>29</sup> Press, Volkswagen. "See Video: Statement Prof. Dr. Martin Winterkorn [Http://t.co/69QGGpCNjP](http://t.co/69QGGpCNjP)." Twitter. September 22, 2015. Accessed April 14, 2018. [https://twitter.com/vwpress\\_en/status/646364207471050756](https://twitter.com/vwpress_en/status/646364207471050756).

<sup>30</sup> Volkswagen. "Video Statement of Prof. Dr. Martin Winterkorn: [Https://t.co/htUtPC1iWM](https://t.co/htUtPC1iWM)." Twitter. September 22, 2015. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://twitter.com/Volkswagen/status/646406987270496256>.



This statement was also published on their American Facebook-site<sup>32</sup>. As with Martin Winterkorn's statement, the statement by Michael Horn follows the same apologetic strategies, although not being as personal as Winterkorn's, as Horn uses "Volkswagen", rather than "I". Horn uses a strategy similar to *Apology* as suggested by Coombs and *Mortification* as suggested by Benoit, in the beginning of the statement, in order to emphasize that Volkswagen takes full responsibility and apologetic. As with Winterkorn's statement, Horn also uses *corrective action*, promising that VW will "remedy this issue", as well as win back the trust of both their shareholders and stakeholders. The statement then ends, by Horn politely asking the stakeholders for patience while they work on addressing the issue, a strategy not suggested by neither Coombs nor Benoit, but can be seen as a way of trying to minimize the amount of negative word of mouth against VW.

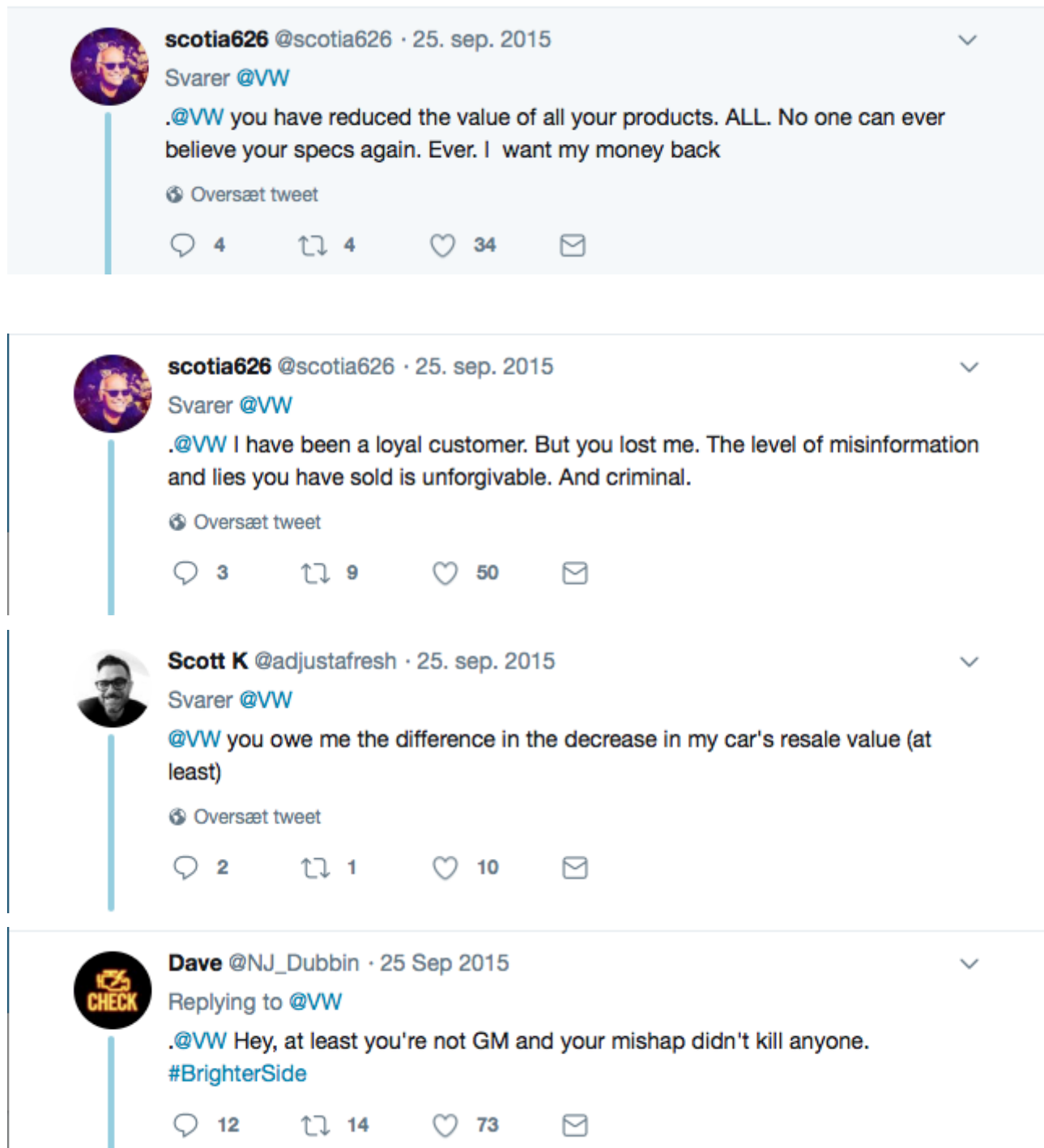
This tweet spurred different reactions from their followers<sup>33</sup>:

<sup>31</sup> USA, Volkswagen. "Update from Volkswagen regarding the EPA Investigation:" Twitter. September 24, 2015. Accessed April 14, 2018. <https://twitter.com/vw/status/647190698223992832>.

<sup>32</sup> Volkswagen. "Michael Horn apology" Facebook. September 25, 2015. Accessed April 14, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/VW/photos/a.172364490789.252046.169890760789/10156127042000790/?type=3&theater>

<sup>33</sup> USA, Volkswagen. "Update from Volkswagen regarding the EPA Investigation:" Twitter. September 24, 2015. Accessed April 14, 2018. <https://twitter.com/vw/status/647190698223992832>.





Although two of the most popular comments are from the same person, namely “scotia626”, they do address two different things, the first focusing on wanting his money back from his car, which is a clear indication that this person is a VW owner and therefore is directly implicated by this incident. This argument is supported by “Scott K”, who as a minimum, wants the difference in resale value of his car. The final criticism by “scotia626” focuses on the illegality and misinformation that VW have spread, as they have previously proclaimed to be focused on being

environmentally aware, and that these lies have resulted in them losing him as a future customer. The last tweet, does not criticize the situation directly, but is written in a much more sarcastic and humorous tone than the others were, by jokingly comparing the VW crisis to General Motors crisis, that resulted in a recall of 2.6 million cars and at least 13 deaths because of faulty airbags. “Dave” ends the joke with the hashtag #BrighterSide. This tweet was the most liked, commented and retweeted comment on this post, which shows that because VW crisis did not, at least directly, result in the death of people, but “only” influenced the environment it is seen as less serious by some stakeholders, or at least easier to laugh at than other crises would be, such as the GM crisis.

Acknowledging the issue at hand, and the fact that the stakeholders had many questions about the fate of their cars, their value and whether or not they would be able to return their car, Volkswagen released nation-specific websites that stakeholders could visit to get all the information they needed<sup>34</sup>. VW also updated the sustainability statement on their website, so it acknowledged their wrong-doing while promising to prevent similar incidents from happening:

“For Volkswagen, sustainability means pursuing economic, social and ecological objectives simultaneously and with equal energy. It is our aim to create lasting values, offer good working conditions, and conserve resources and the environment. When it comes to the emissions issue, we have failed to live up to our own standards in several areas. The irregularities in the handling of emissions tests contradict everything we stand for. We will do everything in our power to prevent incidents of this kind from recurring, and are fully committed to re-embracing our standards and winning back public trust.”<sup>35</sup>

By putting it on their website, they show openness and a will to cooperate, which can help to decrease the anger of the stakeholders, and thereby countering the potential shitstorm.

## Memefication

As a reaction to the scandal, Twitter users began posting memes concerning the controversy immediately after the outbreak. These memes became increasingly popular, with one example being

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<sup>34</sup> “VW Diesel info” Volkswagen Group Sverige AB. April 16 2018 <http://www.vwdieselinfo.se>

<sup>35</sup> “Sustainability.” Volkswagen Group Homepage. Accessed April 16, 2018. <https://www.volkswagenag.com/en/sustainability.html>.



Youtuber "Jaxwagen", whose video on the emission scandal have over 456.000 views and 435 comments on YouTube and was posted on the 18<sup>th</sup> of September immediately after the news broke<sup>36</sup>. This video uses a popular meme, that parodies the movie *Der Untergang* in which Hitler angrily reacts to the imminent defeat of Germany. The parody uses a specific topic, and substitutes the subtitles with said subject, to make it appear as if Hitler is reacting to the topic, which in this instance is the VW emission scandal. Hitler is portrayed as the leader of Volkswagen, joking on the history of it being a German company that was founded by Hitler in the 1930's, who wants to sell even more TDI engines, however is told by his generals that the EPA is forcing them to do a major recall, to which Hitler becomes increasingly mad. Another meme that have been done in many variations, is the comparison between a VW and a coal-driven locomotive such as the one shared by David Taylor on the 22th of September:



Memes like these two examples, and others were shared heavily on Twitter with the hashtag #Dieselgate, mixing within the more serious comments at the time. Although these may seem

<sup>36</sup> Jaxwagen. "Hitler Reacts To The VW-EPA Scandal Dieselgate." YouTube. September 18, 2015. Accessed April 19, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKeflJFpiCA>.

<sup>37</sup> Taylor, David. "That Didn't Take Long #dieselgate #Volkswagen." Twitter. September 22, 2015. Accessed April 19, 2018. [https://twitter.com/DaveTheCarGuy/status/646271550287536128?ref\\_src=twsrc^tfw&ref\\_url=https://www.wheels24.co.za/News/Dieselgate-Internet-reacts-to-VW-scandal-20150923&tfw\\_site=Wheels24](https://twitter.com/DaveTheCarGuy/status/646271550287536128?ref_src=twsrc^tfw&ref_url=https://www.wheels24.co.za/News/Dieselgate-Internet-reacts-to-VW-scandal-20150923&tfw_site=Wheels24).

harmless, these pictures will affect the effort that Volkswagen have put into branding themselves as a clean car brand with clean diesel cars, and will be stay in the memories of the stakeholders for at least some time after the crisis as long as the joke is still funny, thereby also delaying the amount of time that it will take for VW to repair their image and positive word of mouth.

## Case 2: United Airlines and David Dao

### The Company

United Airlines, also known as United, was founded in 1929 and is the third-largest airline in the world today, with more than 88.000 employees<sup>38</sup>. In relation to their corporate responsibility they state that "As the world's leading airline, United is committed to being a responsible global citizen. In towns and cities across the U.S. and around the world, United connects families and friends, colleagues and companies. We strive to meet our responsibilities by taking an active role in our global citizenship by implementing programs and services that help protect our environment, show pride in our communities, celebrate our diversity, protect our human rights and lead our industry in providing a clean, safe and reliable product."<sup>39</sup>.

United is present on several social media sites, such as Facebook<sup>40</sup> and Twitter<sup>41</sup> which will be the main focus for this paper. With more than 985.000 followers on Twitter, and 1.143.000 likes on Facebook, and growing, they have a total of more than 2.128.000 people who are involved with them on these two social channels.

### The Crisis

On the 10th of April 2017, an unexpected situation happened to the crew of United Airlines, that they had not been trained or prepared for. United Airlines unexpectedly had to board four of their crew members onto the flight, which meant that the plane became overbooked. Being one of the biggest airlines in the world, United Airlines naturally has a lot of passengers, and as most airlines, they often overbook flights in order to ensure that a cancellation does not lead to an empty seat. By

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<sup>38</sup> Mutzabaugh, Ben. "The Fleet and Hubs of United Airlines, by the Numbers." USA Today. January 26, 2017. Accessed April 23, 2018. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/travel/flights/todayinthesky/2017/01/26/fleet-and-hubs-united-airlines-numbers/96983530/>.

<sup>39</sup> "Global Citizenship." Company Information & News | United Airlines. Accessed April 23, 2018. <https://www.united.com/web/en-US/content/company/globalcitizenship/default.aspx>.

<sup>40</sup> United. Accessed April 23, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/United/>.

<sup>41</sup> United. Accessed April 23, 2018. <https://twitter.com/united>

doing so, they make sure that they fill as many seats as possible for a flight in order to be as cost-efficient as possible. As every other airline, they have procedures for how to handle an overbooking. The standard procedure for handling overbooking, if no one cancels their flight, is to offer compensation, usually in terms of money, vouchers or hotel stays, to randomly selected passengers, in exchange for them taking a later flight. Usually, this is done before the passengers board the plane, however, as this situation happened rather suddenly, the passengers had already been boarded, before the need to remove four passengers appeared. So the crew did the same in this case as they would if the passengers had not been boarded, by offering compensation to the boarded passengers on the plane, but even when they hit the maximum limit of 1000 dollars in compensation, no one was willing to change their plans, thereby leaving United Airlines with the issue of needing four seats. United Airlines therefore selected four random people who were ordered to leave the plane, however one person, Dr. David Dao, refused, as he had patients to attend to the next day, and with no flight being available that could fly him home before those appointments, it would leave him and his patients in a bad situation if he left the plane. Even though he had refused and come up with a specific argument as to why he could not give up his seat, the crew of United Airlines continued to order him to leave the plane, and therefore called airport security who had such difficulties getting him off the plane that they had to use force by dragging him off the plane. As this happened on board the plane, the other passengers witnessed this ordeal, and were angered and shocked by the way the situation was handled, to the degree that some passengers chose to film it with their phones, then posting it on the United Airlines Facebook-page and Twitter, complaining about the violent situation. The original video was, according to Gizmodo, posted by Audra D. Bridges on Facebook, however the video has since been removed from Facebook. The video was shared on news medias, and other videos were posted on social medias like Twitter. The films show David Dao bleeding from his face, while being dragged through the plane by airport security, before escaping their grip, and thus running into the plane once again, saying “Just kill me” in clear shock and desperation. The reaction to these videos were massive, resulting in a huge backlash towards United Airlines, as people starting posting photos of destroyed United Airlines travel cards on Twitter, expressing their anger through hashtags, and becoming a topic for mockery on certain websites. The fallout of the incident was also visible in their stock value, which lead to a 250-million-dollar loss in market value.

## Analysis

The analysis of the strategies that United Airlines used for their online crisis communication will be based on three elements covering two days of crisis communication: The first official statement that United Airlines released, an internal email that leaked to the public and a second official statement from United Airlines.

### **First official statement:**

In response the situation that had occurred, United Airlines released an official statement written by their CEO Oscar Munoz, which was released on their website, Facebook and Twitter on the evening in which the incident occurred:

*This is an upsetting event to all of us here at United. I apologize for having to re-accommodate these customers. Our team is moving with a sense of urgency to work with the authorities and conduct our own detailed review of what happened. We are also reaching out to this passenger to talk directly to him and further address and resolve this situation.*

**- Oscar Munoz, CEO, United Airlines**

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This statement was received very poorly, when looking at the comment section of their Facebook post. One of the major reasons for this was because of its vagueness on several points. First of all, the statement said that it “is an upsetting event”, which is very vague as it does not address what the “event” actually was, nor why it is upsetting to United. This is most likely written in that fashion, in order to avoid taking any responsibility before United knew exactly what happened. The next sentence does address the event to some extent, however Oscar Munoz chooses to address re-accommodating “these passengers”, thereby trying to tip-toe around the situation that have led to the crisis, namely the passenger David Dao, but rather focusing on all of the customers that had to be re-accommodated. This is done to avoid the violent situation, again, most likely because they need additional information on what happened, before being able to really say

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<sup>42</sup> "United CEO Response to United Express Flight 3411." United. April 10, 2017. Accessed May 1, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/United/posts/1327123630658509:0>.

anything concrete. However, as Oscar Munoz already chooses to apologize for the “re-accommodation of these passengers” Munoz is creating a fauxpology, or a non-apology apology, which resembles a strategy proposed in Benoit’s Image Restoration Theory called “Reducing offensiveness”, in which the accuser, United Airlines, tries to reduce the negativity experienced by the stakeholders. Specifically, it places itself under a combination of two strategies within reducing offensiveness, namely *minimization* and *transcendence*. Minimization is used as Munoz tries to convince the stakeholders that the situation is less serious than it appears to be (Minimization), by placing the event into a broader context, thereby attempting to reduce offensiveness (Transcendence). By calling it a re-accommodation, something normal and frequent, while avoiding to address what happened to David Dao, which is a very unusual situation, Munoz attempts to place it in the broader context of a re-accommodation, rather than focusing on one person and the assault or violence, that it is portrayed by and thought as by the stakeholders, thereby attempting to minimize the seriousness of the event. Afterwards, Munoz communicates that United Airlines does not have all the information that they need, in order to make further statements, stressing that they need to “conduct our own detailed review of everything that happened.”, perhaps hinting that the videos do not tell the full story, and are therefore not credible enough by its own. Oscar Munoz then ends the statement by stating that United is reaching out to “this passenger” in order to talk to him and address the situation. What is interesting about this, is that Munoz does not mention the passenger by name, does not delve further into the reasons for contacting this specific passenger and calls it “this situation”. By calling it “this situation”, Munoz is once again using a combination of minimization and transcendence, as it in the context of what was written previously in the statement, refers to the wording “re-accommodate”, instead of mentioning that as specific violent situation occurred, trying to put the situation in a broader context that makes it seem less serious and by doing so, he is not reinforcing the stakeholder’s views.

Looking at the comments of the stakeholders that saw the United Airlines statement on Facebook, it is evident that this statement did not do anything for reducing the shitstorm against United Airlines, but rather enhancing the strength of the criticism:



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The comments clearly show that the stakeholders were infuriated by the statement's use of the word "re-accommodate", and that they see it as a large understatement of what really happened, as some of the responses are "Trash response." and "Worst CEO response ever". It is clear that the stakeholders have a very clear perspective of this situation as a violent one, through the use of words like "bashing a customer's face in", "assaulting" and "physically assaulting", and that the video evidence of the passenger David Dao, with blood down his face, screaming and running away has given the stakeholders a very strong view on the situation, and that this statement did not do anything to dial down the anger of the stakeholders. What is also evident when looking at comments such as "Trash company." and "I will never fly United again.", is that there is a potential future loss of United Airlines customers. These three comments have a total of more than 110.000 likes, which is a solid indicator that the opinions voiced in these three comments are popular and supported by United's stakeholders. What can be concluded about the first statement from United Airlines is that the statement did not work in reducing offensiveness but rather increase offensiveness, and that the strategies chosen by Oscar Munoz did not work. This one statement

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<sup>43</sup> "United CEO Response to United Express Flight 3411." United. April 10, 2017. Accessed May 1, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/United/posts/1327123630658509:0>.



alone has 141.000 reactions, nearly 12.000 shares and 110.000 comments on Facebook alone, which is a large amount of responses for a single Facebook post. For the sake of comparison, a post from March 11<sup>th</sup> 2018 had 1200 reactions, 228 shares, and 1300 comments.

### **The email Leak**

In addition to the official statement for the stakeholders, Oscar Munoz sent an internal email to the employees of United, in which he addresses the employees by telling them that he stands by them, and includes a recap of the events that happened on the airplane. The email was leaked to CNBC, a business oriented network, and made public by CNBC Travel-editor Ryan Ruggiero on Twitter<sup>44</sup>.

He starts out by sympathizing with the United workers, and then states that he will be giving them a recap of what have happened, and what they know so far, even though they are still trying to figure out “why this customer defied Chicago Aviation Security Officers the way he did”. What Oscar Munoz is trying to do here, is to both evade responsibility, which resembles strategies of both Benoit and Coombs. By saying that the “customer defied” the aviation officers, he is alluding that David Dao is the culprit in this situation, as he defied the officers, thereby claiming that what happened to David Dao, only happened because of his defiance. This strategy is referred to as *provocation* by Benoit, and is used as an attempt to evade responsibility and shifting the blame. Munoz’s strategy can both be seen as *scapegoating* and *justification* when using SCCT by Coombs. It can be seen as scapegoating, because Munoz is blaming David Dao, a person outside of the organization, and because he states that it was Chicago Aviation Security Officers who handled the situation, and therefore not the United Airlines staff who are to blame. It can be seen as justification, because Munoz is trying to justify what happened to David Dao, by arguing that it was because of his defiance. This justification and scapegoating is also seen in the next paragraph, where Munoz argues that “this situation was unfortunately compounded when one of the passengers we politely asked to deplane refused and it became necessary to contact Chicago Aviation Security Officers to help.”. Munoz justifies the situation by stating that United Airlines “politely asked” David Dao to deplane, and that the situation escalated because of his refusal. The scapegoating lies implicitly in the mentioning of the aviation security. By stating that United called security, he is arguing that it was not United who did anything, but rather the security officers, who now becomes

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<sup>44</sup> Ruggiero, Ryan. "INBOX: @united CEO Sends Letter to Employees about United Express Flight." Twitter. April 10, 2017. Accessed May 4, 2018. <https://twitter.com/ryanruggiero/status/851577150117425154>.



the scapegoats, thereby attempting to diminish the amount of responsibility that United have been accused for, in the case of what happened to David Dao, and how he was handled. Munoz then states that the personnel followed the established procedures for handling “situations like this”, however does not describe in further details what said situation is, and therefore continues in the same matter of vagueness as in the official statement released to the public, before complimenting the personnel for “going above and beyond to ensure we fly right.” Munoz then proceeds to state that “there are lessons we can learn from this experience”, which is not directly an admittance of United doing something wrong, but an ascertainment that this should not be considered common practice for future references. This resembles the strategy *corrective action* by Benoit, in which the accuser claims that they will correct the problem to avoid it occurring in the future, however it cannot be seen as neither Benoit’s *mortification* nor an *apology* as proposed by Coombs, as no responsibility has been taken to the case.

The portrayal of David Dao as the troublesome and defying passenger continues during the bulletpoints that summarizes the situation. Munoz argues that after boarding, they needed space for four United employees, and therefore had to remove four passengers who had already been boarded into the plane. He claims that “We sought volunteers” and using their involuntary denial of boarding process, then reaching out to David Dao, to inform him that he “was being denied boarding”. However, as he was already boarded, it seems contradictory to argue that he could be denied boarding afterwards, and most likely did not help to dial down the strong reactions of David Dao. Munoz states that David Dao “raised his voice and refused to comply with crew member instructions”, once again portraying Dao as the aggregator of the situation by using provocation as proposed by Benoit, in an attempt to evade responsibility by arguing that what United, or the airport security, did, was in response to another wrongful act. Munoz continues the provocation throughout the remainder of the email, by arguing that Dao was “disruptive and belligerent”, and that they were “unable to gain his cooperation and physically removed him from the flight”. Looking at the linguistic choices of Munoz, it is clear that he is trying to paint a specific narrative of David Dao as an aggressive and threatening person. The word to “defy” is defined by Merriam-Webster as “to challenge to combat” in its archaic form and “to confront with assured power of resistance” in its modern form<sup>45</sup>, once again making it sound like Dao was on the verge of fighting the personnel of the flight. Comparing this to the Munoz argument that they were looking for volunteers, it is evident that Munoz explanation is conflicting. A volunteer, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is

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<sup>45</sup> "Defy." Merriam-Webster. Accessed May 5, 2018. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/defy>.

“someone who does something without being forced to do it.”, which is completely contradictory to the situation that Munoz himself outlines, as Dao was removed by force. Another example is the use of “belligerent”, which is also a negative laden word, used for describing someone who is exhibiting hostility<sup>46</sup>. These linguistic choices are consistent throughout the email, and are strategies that resemble those of both Benoit and Coombs, namely *provocation* and *justification*. Portraying David Dao in this way, makes it much easier to justify the actions made by United Airlines and the Chicago Aviation Security Officers, thereby attempting to evade responsibility and diminish the crisis.

The portrayal of David Dao stands in great contrast to the portrayal of the United employees, who Munoz describes as trying to “explain apologetically” why Dao had to be denied boarding, and that “Our employees followed established procedures for dealing with situations like this.” as well as arguing that “Our agents were left with no choice”, thereby portraying the United staff as fair and polite throughout the whole ordeal. This contrast further strengthens the negative portrayal of David Dao.

Another argument that Munoz implies, is the argument of safety, as he earlier in his email writes that United and the employees must continue “to go above and beyond to ensure we fly right”. To “fly right” is in the perspective that Munoz puts it, the reason that the whole crisis happened. David Dao was being aggressive and therefore a threat to the security of the staff, and perhaps the passengers, so the forcible removal was necessary. This resembles the *transcendence* strategy by Benoit, as Munoz places the case, the “re-accomodation” in a different context, “to fly right”, and thereby further legitimizing the actions.

Throughout the email, it is clear that Munoz is using strategies that aims to either reduce the offensiveness of the crisis or evade responsibility. As the crisis is videotaped and the witnesses aplenty, along with major media coverage from the emergence of the situation, it is not possible to use denial, except for the scapegoating strategy proposed by Coombs, which Munoz also uses, as Munoz cannot deny that the situation happened, but he can, as he does in this email, try to diminish it and scapegoat through David Dao and the airport security. This email was intended to be an internal email and therefore not meant to go public, and it can be argued that it does not fall under the category of crisis communication because of this, however, this is the view of United Airlines at the time, and therefore the view that the employees of United must portray when confronting customers, thereby becoming crisis communication when the employees must deal with customers

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<sup>46</sup> ”Belligerent.” Merriam-Webster. Accessed May 5, 2018<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/belligerent>

outside social media. Furthermore, this email substantiates the argument that Munoz had a specific strategy on how to handle the crisis at this time, and that this strategy is exerted in this email.

## The Second Official Statement

Dear Team,

The truly horrific event that occurred on this flight has elicited many responses from all of us: outrage, anger, disappointment. I share all of those sentiments, and one above all: my deepest apologies for what happened. Like you, I continue to be disturbed by what happened on this flight and I deeply apologize to the customer forcibly removed and to all the customers aboard. No one should ever be mistreated this way.

I want you to know that we take full responsibility and we will work to make it right.

It's never too late to do the right thing. I have committed to our customers and our employees that we are going to fix what's broken so this never happens again. This will include a thorough review of crew movement, our policies for incentivizing volunteers in these situations, how we handle oversold situations and an examination of how we partner with airport authorities and local law enforcement. We'll communicate the results of our review by April 30<sup>th</sup>.

I promise you we will do better.

Sincerely,

Oscar

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The following day, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of April, the second official, and last, statement was released by United on their website, and their Twitter and Facebook pages both had a post with a link to this page on their website, along with the text "United CEO Oscar Munoz: I'm sorry. We will fix this.". This message is vastly different from the first statement and the email that had been sent out the previous day, both in its framing and in its wording. The message starts out with a "Dear Team," which is an attempt to unify the stakeholders with the company, eradicating the division that had been the case since the crisis emerged, where the stakeholders did not feel that United showed the values that the customers appreciate. It becomes clear throughout in the statement, that this is the case, and that it is not meant as a message to the United employees, as the statement continues using the same kind of framing. This framing appears in the following sentence, when Munoz argues that the situation "has elicited many responses from all of us: outrage, anger

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<sup>47</sup> "Statement from United Airlines CEO, Oscar Munoz, on United Express Flight 3411." United Hub. April 11, 2017. Accessed May 7, 2018. <https://hub.united.com/united-express-3411-statement-oscar-munoz-2355968629.html>.

disappointment.”, using the words “all of us” to emphasize that United understands the stakeholders outrage and feels the same way, but also to further develop the idea of United and the stakeholders as a team. Munoz then becomes more personal by saying the he himself shares those feelings with the stakeholders, before apologizing for the incident, or has he says it “my deepest apologies for what happened.” Although still vague in defining “what happened”, he does become more specific further on in the statement as “I deeply apologize to the customer forcibly removed and to all the customers aboard.”. By doing so, he acknowledges that the action taken were the wrong one, and no longer calls it a re-accommodation, which means that he listened to the critique that he and United received in the past 24 hours. One can argue that him stating that the even has “elicited many responses” is an understatement, when comparing the reactions that united got for the single Facebook post containing the first statement, to any unrelated Facebook post that United have published before and after, and thereby using the strategy Minimization within *Reducing Offensiveness* to make it seem less serious than it appears to be.

This strategy is one that is proposed by both Coombs and Benoit. Coombs calls the strategy *Apology* within the “Rebuild Crisis Response Strategies”, and Benoit for *Mortification*, where the crisis manager, in this case Munoz, indicates that the company, United, takes responsibility for the crisis and asks for forgiveness by the stakeholders.

The remainder of the statement is a promise that United and Munoz will make certain that such a situation will not happen again, and specific actions that will be taking place up until April 30<sup>th</sup>, where United will release the results. This strategy is not mentioned by Coombs, however Benoit defines it in his theory as *Corrective Action*, where the accused promises to correct the problem by means such as preventing it from reoccurring, which is exactly what Munoz is promising to do. Munoz finishes the statement by writing “Sincerely, Oscar”, which is much more personal than the original statement, which was more official as it included his last name and his position in the company. This makes Munoz seem more down to earth and makes the promises in the statement appear as if they are coming from one person, rather than a corporate decision that is focused on retaining its financial situation, and further adds to the argument that Oscar Munoz is attempting to unify United and the stakeholders again. Using a more human voice and a personal narrative like Munoz is attempting to do here, indicates, according to research, that the perception of social presence and interactivity, which then leads to a more positive crisis-outcome<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> Park, Hyojung, and Glen T. Cameron. "Keeping It Real." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 91, no. 3 (2014): 487-507. doi:10.1177/1077699014538827.

Although this statement was much more apologetic, and written with an awareness of the opinions of the stakeholders, it was not received well by the recipients on Facebook, where 32.700 of the 44.400 likes were an angry-smiley, that symbolizes that people are mad about the statement released, 5800 were normal likes, a support towards the statement, and 5000 were laughing-smileys, which can either mean that they are happy about the statement, or that they find the statement funny. The comments acknowledge that United is making an apology, but clearly show that the stakeholders do not believe in the apology, and that they do not believe in the reasons why they are giving the excuse. The words “Too late!” shows how the apology by Munoz might have been accepted, had it not been for the original statement and the leaked email, which indicates that the stakeholders at least acknowledges the apology, and therefore, that the strategies used by Munoz in the second statement may have worked if they had been used from the beginning of the crisis.

The morning of April 11<sup>th</sup> revealed that United Airlines stock had dropped close to 1 billion dollars in market value after the crisis, and this news shows in the way that the apology was received by the stakeholders. In the examples shown in this paper such as “Translation: I am sorry that our stock value tumbled today” and “Now that your stock is tanking, you’re apologetic.” is it is clear that the stakeholders believe that the apology comes on the background of the stock diving, rather than being a sincere apology based on ethics. Another criticism by the stakeholders is the email that was leaked the previous day, where one writes “What about your email yesterday? You think that’s all forgotten.”, indicating that United and Munoz should have addressed this in their apology also, rather than ignoring it.

What these comments show is that it is simply too late to save the shitstorm, and that the crisis remains a crisis, even after United have tried several strategies for handling it, which indicates that there is no way for United to save their reputation and face in this case. What they also show is, that had it not been for the email leak, and the first statement, the apology of the second statement might have been accepted, and United would have a better chance of regaining the trust of their stakeholders. This means, that it is plausible that it is not the strategies proposed by Coombs and Benoit, that are at fault for the crisis to continue to snowball, but rather caused by a wrong choice of strategies, and unforeseen circumstances from the outside in the shape of a leaked email and a stock diving.



**Matthew Buch** Too late! Never will fly this pathetic excuse for an airline again. I hope your company goes bankrupt and can never recover from this.

Synes godt om · Svar · 1 år



↪ 197 svar



**Jong Lee** Translation:

I am sorry that our stock value tumbled today and negatively affected the compensation packages of myself and our top executives. We will do our best to fix this in hopes that our stock price recovers so that we can resume getting paid millions to buy off politicians and screw our customers.

Sincerely,  
Oscar

Synes godt om · Svar · 1 år · Redigeret



↪ 137 svar



**Courtenay Garcia** There was no overbooking. You assaulted an elderly doctor to deadhead a crew. Now that your stock is tanking, you're apologetic. What about your email yesterday? You think that's all forgotten.

Synes godt om · Svar · 1 år



↪ 307 svar

## Memefication

Similar to Volkswagen, United Airlines was also memeified by the public and became a subject for many jokes, however to a larger degree than VW was, as United Airlines was not only a victim of these jokes from the public, but also from the media. Because of the way that United Airlines and their CEO David Munoz handled the shitstorm in terms of their communication, and the criticism that followed, they were mocked profusely on social media.

Especially the use of “re-accommodate” was targeted as the foundation for the mockery, with memes that were shared on Twitter-profiles such as 9GAG, a popular content community for

meme-sharing, who shared a meme depicting a scene from the movie *300* in which King Leonidas originally yells “This is Sparta” before kicking a man down a hole of abyss, however, for the sake of the meme, it is changed to “This is United Airlines”:



The memes did not only appear on Twitter and Facebook, but also on the website Merriam-Webster, an otherwise very serious website, who saw the opportunity to join in on the joke to perhaps get some extra popularity. The website created an article looking into the use of the word *volunteer* by United Airlines after seeing the searches for the word spike by 1900% compared to a normal day. Merriam-Webster does however, quite sarcastically, state that “Some of the interest in the definition of volunteer may come from the wording of the statement from United, since a person who did not volunteer to leave was then described as refusing “to leave the aircraft voluntarily”—and subsequently being forced to do it.” showing their own negative opinion on the communication by United Airlines, without being too offensive<sup>50</sup>. They also posted a link to the

<sup>49</sup> 9GAG, "Twitter Post". April 12, 2017, 1:07 PM. Accessed May 11 2018  
<https://twitter.com/9GAG/status/852115847485239298>

<sup>50</sup> "United: 'Our Team Looked for Volunteers' - Trending 4/10/2017." Merriam-Webster. April 10, 2017. Accessed May 5, 2018. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/news-trend-watch/united-our-team-looked-for-volunteers-20170410>.

article on twitter, with the caption ” 'Volunteer' means “someone who does something without being forced to do it.”<sup>51</sup>, getting +38.000 retweets and +63.000 likes. In comparison, a tweet published by them on the 15th of may about the difference between the words 'vice' and 'vise' got 54 retweets and 243 likes. Merria-Webster was not the only one to joke about this, as traditional media in the form of talkshows also made jokes about the shitstorm, with Jimmy Kimmels parody advertisement going viral. In this advertisement, where the fake flight attendant at one point says ” Give us a problem and we'll drag your ass off the plane, and if you resist, we'll beat you so badly you'll be using your own face as a flotation device. United Airlines: F\*\*\* You.”. In the monologue by Kimmel, he further criticizes Oscar Munoz for his choice of words by calling it ”corporate B.S. Speak”<sup>52</sup>. The virality went even further, escalating in meme-pages being created on Twitter, such as ”United Over Bookings”, which was a site solely intended to post memes about the shitstorm<sup>53</sup>.

United Airlines was heavily hit by memes, and it is clear that the wording used in the statement was the catalyst for many of the jokes, and thereby avoidable by United, had they chosen a different way of framing their statements. These memes are out of Uniteds control, and therefore not something that they can control nor censor, and will as a result of this be available for the public now and to remind the stakeholders the next time a crisis similar to this happens, thereby further worsening their crisis history.

## Discussion

A question that appeared while analyzing the case of Volkswagen, is whether or not VW experienced a shitstorm, or if they just experienced the mechanics of a crisis. Looking at the attention that VW got, it does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that VW experienced a shitstorm, but rather a crisis in its traditional sense. As Sascha Lobo defines the term “shitstorm”, there needs to be an aggressive or attacking tone that is detached from the original critique itself, the emission fraud in the case of VW, however, it appears through the comments on social media, that people, although negative, were mostly focused on the original critique, and it can therefore be

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<sup>51</sup> "'Volunteer' Means "someone Who Does Something without Being Forced to Do It."" Merriam-Webster. April 11, 2017. Accessed May 5, 2018. <https://twitter.com/MerriamWebster/status/851602942037819392>.

<sup>52</sup> Oppenheim, Maya. "Jimmy Kimmel Mocks United Airlines in Parody Ad following Flight Incident." The Independent. April 12, 2017. Accessed May 12, 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/jimmy-kimmel-united-airlines-advert-parody-flight-3411-incident-dr-david-dao-drag-plane-a7680486.html>.

<sup>53</sup> "United Over Bookings." @UnitedOverBooks. April 11, 2017. Accessed May 12, 2018. <https://twitter.com/UnitedOverBooks>.



argued that VW did not experience a shitstorm. However, because of the large amount of negative opinions for VW, their negative brand ratings, and mockery on social media in the shape of memes as analyzed earlier, it can still be argued that VW was in fact caught in a shitstorm. The memes did, just like Sascha Lobo argues is necessary for a shitstorm, possess a criticism that was detached from the original critique while attacking the moral of the company. What can be concluded from this, is that while United faced a shitstorm from all sides of social media, Volkswagen mostly experienced a shitstorm from the newer and more unconventional way, the memes on social media, while the other negative opinions were mainly focused on original topic for the crisis itself. It can therefore be argued, that the shitstorm VW experienced was milder, however they did still experience a shitstorm, and it will therefore still be viewed as a shitstorm for the remainder of this paper, however it is acknowledged that VW through correct use of strategies, did diminish the risk of escalating the shitstorm unlike United.

Another topic for discussion appears on the basis of the previous question, namely whether or not a shitstorm is the result of bad crisis management, or if it can be seen as an independent issue that a crisis brings with it because of the social media factor that the internet has brought along. In the case of United Airlines, it is evident that the shitstorm escalated because of United Airlines choosing the wrong strategies, which enhanced the outrage by the stakeholders further. Comparing this case to the case of VW, Volkswagen chose the correct strategy from the beginning, and did not experience an enhancement of the shitstorm, because the criticism mainly continued to be focused on the original critique. It can therefore be argued, that bad crisis management can lead to a shitstorm, or at least enhance the volatility of a shitstorm. It is however necessary to stress that this does not mean that a shitstorm only happens because of bad crisis communication. Shitstorms is the result of feelings and how a story is being angled by the media and the public online. United Airlines did, as an example, already experience a shitstorm before their statements, as people were angered by the violent situation, and the discussion online meant that the crisis had already been angled before United Airlines released their statement. Other examples of shitstorms also show that emotions can lead to a shitstorm, even if the crisis response fits within the theories of Coombs and Benoit. One example is the Copenhagen Zoo, who experienced a shitstorm after euthanizing the giraffe Marius. Even though they followed international protocol for breeding, and defended themselves throughout the crisis, they still experienced a shitstorm, especially from stakeholders outside of Denmark, who believed that it was inhumane, resulting in death threats and critique from

international organizations<sup>54</sup>. This was solely based on emotions rather than logical arguments, which shows that a shitstorm can happen despite of a correct choice in crisis response. This means that a shitstorm is not necessarily a result of bad crisis management, but should still be seen as an independent issue to crisis communication.

In relation to this, the reason why the shitstorm escalated to the extent that it did for United Airlines is because of the way that United and Munoz handled the crisis in comparison to Volkswagen. Most of the critique that United faced, was critique based on the original statement, rather than the incident itself. The reason for this is a bad choice in crisis strategy. Coombs divides his strategies into three crisis clusters: *Victim cluster*, *accidental cluster* and *preventable cluster*. United Airlines chose strategies that resembles those within the *victim cluster* and *accidental cluster*, as United used *denial*, *scapegoating*, *excuse* and *justification* strategies in their first statement. Victim cluster is meant to be used when the organization is also a victim like in a case of a natural disaster or product tampering, which is not the case for this crisis, as United was not the victim. The accidental cluster is to be used when the actions of the organization that lead to the crisis is unintentional, such as if a technical error causes an accident or causes a recall. Again, this is not the case for United Airlines, which then means that, according to Coombs, United used the wrong strategies for their crisis, as they should have used the *intentional cluster*, as the organization took inappropriate actions by handling David Dao in the violent manner that they did. United should have acknowledged that this was the case from the beginning, using the strategies *compensation* and *apology*, which they did in their final statement. The comments for the final statement shows, that the apology is acknowledged, however the stakeholders say that it is “too late”, as United have said different things prior to this excuse, which makes the excuse seem insincere as if it is only being given to save face, rather than to truly apologize. The acknowledgment of the excuse, does however show, that had United chosen the right strategies from the beginning, they might have been able to diminish the crisis to a certain extent. This is also visible from the criticism that United got through the memes and jokes that were posted online. None of these memes were focusing on the crisis itself, but rather on the lexical choices that the CEO Munoz used in the statement, such as “volunteer” and “re-accommodation”, which many found humorous, offensive and contradictory to the actual situation.

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<sup>54</sup> Naik, Bharati, and Marie-Louise Gumuchian. "Danish Zoo Kills Healthy Giraffe, Feeds Body to Lions." CNN. February 10, 2014. Accessed April 20, 2018. <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/02/09/world/europe/denmark-zoo-giraffe/>.

Comparing United's choices of crisis communication strategies with VW's choices, gives an indication of why VW did not experience as large a shitstorm as United did, as VW chose the *intentional cluster* from the beginning rather than attempt to use excuse and scapegoating strategies. An explanation for why United chose to try out a different strategy compared to VW, despite of their similarities in who is to blame, and their use of such a vague form of communication in their statement can also be credited to the dilemma that shareholders are put in, when a crisis emerges that the organization shares responsibility for. The shareholders and organization obviously wants to be considered morally decent but they also have to protect themselves against a potential lawsuit. In the case of VW, there is clear data in the form of actual research and testing that shows that they have done something wrong, a defeat device, as well as a statement by an official government organization stating that VW have cheated with their emissions, thereby proving them guilty from the beginning of the crisis. This is much different than the case of United, where there is evidence of a passenger being dragged off the plane, but no information on whether it was United staff or airport staff who chose to handle the situation in this way, as well as no real information on why it happened, except for the statements made by other passengers. At the emergence of the crisis United could choose between admitting that they were at fault, thereby risking a hefty lawsuit that could cost them a considerable sum of money, or try to find a way to make them less responsible for the situation, like blaming the passenger or airport security. United chose the latter, however failed in succeeding and thereby ended out by giving a settlement to David Dao, as well as losing potential customers, brand value and share value. Benoit argues that an organization should always acknowledge their wrong-doings<sup>55</sup>, however also acknowledges that what might be the best for the image and brand of an organization, might not be the best from a juridical point of view<sup>56</sup>. This explains the vague and ambiguous statement that United first wrote, as being specific would result in a negative outcome, not matter if they had apologized or shifted blame.

Having analyzed the two cases crisis types and applied strategies, using the strategies in the crisis communication theories by Benoit and Coombs, there appears to be both similarities and differences in the outcomes of the shitstorms. When focusing solely on the stakeholder's reactions,

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<sup>55</sup> Benoit, William L. "Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration Strategies." *Choice Reviews Online* 33, no. 03 (September 1995). Accessed May 15, 2018. doi:10.5860/choice.33-1337. P. 161

<sup>56</sup> Benoit, William L. "Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration Strategies." *Choice Reviews Online* 33, no. 03 (September 1995). Accessed May 15, 2018. doi:10.5860/choice.33-1337. P.141

it appears as if Volkswagen was more successful in their crisis communication effort than United Airlines was, as the amount of comments, likes and mentions that the VW crisis got on social media was massively smaller than for United Airlines. Part of this can be explained by social media perhaps not being used in the same way during the Volkswagen case, as it was when the United Airlines crisis happened, since complaining on a company's social media profiles are becoming increasingly popular<sup>57</sup>. Another explanation can be the human aspect that is a crucial part of the United crisis. United's crisis happened because a person was the center of a violent situation, whereas the VW crisis was based on an environmental crisis, where no people were directly harmed. This argument is visible through one of the stakeholders who commented on the VW crisis on Twitter, saying that it did not go as bad as the GM crisis at least, a case where people died as a direct result of a mistake by General Motors. This is not to say that VW did not experience a shitstorm, as several hashtags became trending on Twitter such as #Dieselgate and #Volkswagengate, a massive amount of news articles and stakeholders who complained to VW and then got their cars refunded or repaired, but the amount of data in the form of comments, likes, shares, retweets on social media was far less than it was in the case of United Airlines.

VW and United had two very different strategies when it comes to response times. Usually, it would be best to handle a crisis as soon as it happens, as it will make the organization more suited for controlling the situation, the information and to control the story before the media starts writing about the crisis. This also helps to diminish the reputational threat, and avoiding a shitstorm, and with social media being a quick way to share information, the demand for a quick response is therefore increased further<sup>58</sup>. United responded in the shape of a statement on the following day of the crisis, however did not do much in terms of responding to the criticism online. The social media team did not respond to the comments dealing with the crisis, most likely waiting for people higher up in the company's hierarchy to tell them how much they could say. Because the video of David Dao had been public for a day, millions of people had already seen it, and United had been framed as the bad guy. Volkswagen chose to handle their crisis much different than United did, as they did

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<sup>57</sup> Mangles, Carolanne "The rise of social media customer care" Smart Insights. December 5, 2017. Accessed May 15, 2018. <https://www.smartinsights.com/customer-relationship-management/customer-service-and-support/rise-social-media-customer-care/>

<sup>58</sup> Maheshwari, Sapna. "United and Pepsi Affairs Force Brands to Respect Social Media." The New York Times. April 14, 2017. Accessed May 16, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/13/business/media/united-and-pepsi-affairs-force-brands-to-respect-social-media.html>.

not say anything, on any platform or media for a long time when compared to United Airlines. Much like an ostrich that hides its head underground until the danger is over, Volkswagen kept silence for the first week of the crisis. Although this seems like a long time, there is some logic to keeping silent, rather than answering from the beginning. As seen in the case of United, the response was not taken well. Although it was mostly a result of bad communication and wrong choice of strategy, the response time can partly be to blame. Because they responded the day after, in the heat of the moment where the stakeholders were the most outraged, but still with such a delay that news organizations and the stakeholders on social media had created their own opinion on the matter, they were at a great risk of being criticized. Volkswagen chose to wait until the storm had mellowed down, and people had gotten over the worst of their outrage, and when they responded, they responded in a much different manner, by answering the comments on their American Facebook-page, as well as launching a website in multiple languages, that stated what would happen to their customer's cars, as well as an apology which acknowledged the outrage that the stakeholders felt. By waiting VW could create a clear crisis strategy that covered many of the aspects that the stakeholders were worried about, in comparison to United, who released a statement that hardly addressed their stakeholder's feelings, and who did not respond to their stakeholders on social media. As social media is such an integral part of many people's lives, and news spreading fast with its 24-hour a day news nature, a crisis can travel and evolve fast, starting by a small number of people discussing and sharing it on a social media platform, becoming bigger and bigger, before the story is grabbed by a news organization and spread to even more people. If an organization does not respond the rumors and fails to respond quickly, they run the risk of creating an information vacuum that is controlled by rumors and speculations, forming their own opinion on the matter, which is then only strengthened as more people and more of the media joins in on spreading these rumors and speculations. What these two cases shows is that although logic states that an organization should answer quickly in order to control the crisis, the organization needs a very concrete action plan for handling the crisis, and they need a social media team that are ready and equipped to handle the situation from the beginning, as being silent for a few hours can lead to bad crisis handling. What they also show is that it can be beneficial to wait with responding in any way until the organization has created a proper crisis strategy, even if this means a week of silence, however this should only be done when the risk of rumors is low. It is crucial to point out, that because VW had a very clear accusation, and therefore no rumors, it is much easier for them to wait with responding, as the chance of rumors being spread is minimal, compared to United who had a

situation that was constituted by rumors and speculation based on videos. These cases show that there might be a connection between the risk of rumors and speculations, and the amount of time that an organization should wait, until responding to the crisis. If the crisis is at a high risk of being controlled by speculation, like the case of United, the response time should be very quick, in order to control the speculations and the facts of the story, whereas in a crisis that is at a low risk of being controlled by speculation, like the case of VW, it is of less importance to respond quickly, as there are fewer rumors that needs to be controlled by the organization.

Another difference in the way that VW and United addressed their stakeholders, is the fact that while VW' Michael Horn asks their stakeholders for patience as VW tries to address the issue and promises to share more information as it appears, United did none of the sorts. United did state that they were working with urgency, however asking for patience was not part of their statement. The strategy of prolonging the possible criticism like VW's Michael Horn did, is not a strategy proposed by neither Benoit nor Coombs, however it does appear to have had a possible influence of the negative spread of rumors that could otherwise have happened, like in the case of United Airlines. It should therefore be considered, if asking for patience, rather than expecting it, should be a tool when handling a shitstorm, as it might be seen by the stakeholders as an acknowledgment of their feelings towards the company and a promise that something will be done. In return for the stakeholder's patience, VW launched a website with guidelines for those affected by the emission tampering, as well as information on what the crisis was about, what VW did wrong and what they will be doing differently in the future. This can be seen as a new take on Benoit's strategy of *corrective action*, where the accused claims that the problem will be corrected, while also being a modern take on Coombs *compensation* strategy where the shareholders offer money or gifts to the victims, as it is a concrete promise that changes will be made, and a gift for the stakeholders in the shape of comfort in knowing what will happen to their car.

One issue that neither company addresses, is the issue of memes to which they were exposed to in a large scale. The phenomenon of memes is not addressed by Coombs or Benoit, and it is therefore a place where the two theories fail in addressing how to handle shitstorms, as it can become a large issue that shareholders need to address if they want to keep rumors and speculation at a minimum as well as maintaining the ability to control the information that is spread on the internet. Coombs uses crisis history in his SCCT, arguing that a company's prior crises can have an influence on the crisis level and reputational threat of a new crisis. Because of these memes being

on the internet forever and are easy to find, they will reappear the next time a crisis happens, further influencing the crisis level, as it reminds the stakeholders of the crisis in an exaggerated fashion that the stakeholders might not realize is exaggerated because it happened a long time ago. This influences the spread of rumors and speculation even further, which is why this is important to address when countering a shitstorm.

Another issue that the crisis communication theories have, is the issue of being able to understand the crisis from the perspective of their stakeholders and articulate the actions of the business into the eyes of the stakeholders. This is evident, especially in the case of United Airlines, for these shitstorms. United Airlines specifically, did not do anything to put themselves into the eyes of the consumer, as they did not do a good job at understanding why the stakeholders were angered. This is clear throughout the entire shitstorm, where Munoz at no point apologizes for using “re-accommodation”, which was the culprit for the shitstorm reaching the levels that it did. Had he taken responsibility and apologized for the way he framed his statement, and acknowledged the anger that the stakeholders felt towards the framing, he might have been able to rectify for some of his wrongdoings, as suggested by Coombs and Benoit with their strategies *apology* and *mortification*. Volkswagen on the other hand, put themselves in the eyes of the stakeholders, acknowledging that they had done something wrong, but VW chose to use a strategy that none of the two theories propose, that is to directly ask for the patience of the stakeholders, while VW made their own internal investigation. By doing so, they are addressing the issue that a shitstorm brings with it, namely that rumors and misinformation can spread fast, and acknowledges the fact that it needs to be handled in some way. Both traditional theories on crisis communication lacks a strategy that handles this issue of misinformation, and it is plausible that VW had a success in diminishing the misinformation by asking for patience while they did their investigation.

One of the major differences between these two cases were the choices of strategies that were used, as VW went directly for an apology, whereas United tried other strategies. The outcome of the two cases were, despite of their comparative starting points, very different, as United ended up with customers who were more provoked and angry about the statements and strategies used by Munoz, than they seemed to be with the actual crisis, thereby creating an even bigger shitstorm. In comparison, Volkswagen apologized from the beginning, and avoided that kind of criticism, which leads to the argument that it is not the theories of Coombs and Benoit that was at fault for United’s

shitstorm reaching the level that it did, but rather the choice of strategies on the behalf of United. This is much in line with the argument of Benoit who believes that an organization at fault should always apologize, just like Volkswagen did. This difference in reactions do however show, how the theories of Benoit and Coombs are useful to combine, rather than choosing one of them as a crisis communication tool. While Coombs theory is inspired by many of the same strategies as Benoit, it does not consider *Corrective Action* a strategy like Benoit presents it as in his theory. Volkswagen used corrective action from the beginning of their crisis handling, something that United did not do. As previously mentioned, there can be certain legal reasons for this choice, however, because Volkswagen did promise to do corrective action, and showed that they meant it by releasing different awareness campaigns for their stakeholders, as well as responding to their comments on social media, they were able to use corrective action as a way of diminishing the reputational threat. This shows that Coombs might have been wrong to not acknowledge this as a strategy in his theory. At the same time, Coombs has a much more context-aware way of doing crisis communication, that Benoit lacks. Coombs takes crisis history, crisis type and prior relationship reputation into account before recommending a specific strategy, which Benoit does not. The chances of choosing a wrong strategy decreases, as there are more steps to take, before choosing the correct strategy, whereas Benoit's relies more on gut-feeling, again not taking the stakeholders into consideration. While the chances are decreased, there is however an issue with SCCT that Image Repair Theory does not have, because of its fewer steps. SCCT was built for organizational crises that stems from operational issues, meaning that is a choice between did the crisis occur because of an operational issue or not. Using SCCT for a crisis that has not occurred because of an operational crisis can therefore have a negative outcome, as it does not address spreading of rumors and misinformation, a part of shitstorms that have become increasingly popular with the internet and social media. Benoit's theory on the other hand, is aimed at dealing with these sorts of crisis, one example being the Pepsi vs Coca-Cola wars, where Benoit used the theory to argue what strategies should be used next, making the theory more flexible. The argument can therefore be made, that because both theories have their different strengths and weaknesses, despite of their similar strategies, they can be used in compliance with each other, to evaluate if the strategies prepared will be the correct ones to use, especially in a case like United Airline's, where it is not only an operational crisis, but also a crisis concerning rumors and possible misinformation.



## Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to answer the problem formulation: “In what way did the Volkswagen and United airlines cases use crisis communication strategies resembling those of SCCT and Image Restoration Theory, and how are shitstorms as an online phenomenon challenging these traditional theories?”. This paper analyzed the VW and United cases from the emergence of the shitstorms, to the responses that the two companies made in relation to the shitstorm, and the strategies that they used, comparing them to the strategies by Benoit and Coombs. After analyzing the cases and strategies separately, the two cases are then compared to the strategies, which have resulted in the following conclusions to the problem formulation:

While the theories of Coombs and Benoit were still applicable in an online context, and can therefore be used for handling, avoiding and diminishing shitstorms, shitstorms do challenge the theories, showing that the theories have their shortcomings that one must keep in mind before using the strategies.

For one, neither theory acknowledges the juridical concerns that an organization must take before releasing a statement, and the risk that there is of a lawsuit, if the organization admits blame. Benoit does in all fairness acknowledge that what is best for crisis communication, might not be the best in terms of legal actions, however, it is not taken into account through the strategies given in his or Coombs theories, and is therefore something that a crisis communication team must find their own way of incorporating. This leads to a risk of not being able to use the strategies properly as they are intended, because the legal threats intrude the crisis theories, which is evident in the case of United Airlines, where the crisis communication was weakened by a legal vagueness in order to avoid a lawsuit, which then lead to further criticism as the vagueness was criticized heavily and created a bigger shitstorm by the stakeholders. Furthermore, having to consult a legal team with a crisis communication strategy before releasing it also delays the response time, which can result in rumors being spread and a lack of control on addressing the stream of information that is spread around the internet. As the response time is crucial for avoiding a shitstorm and because of the nature of the internet, law becomes a hindrance that needs to be addressed.

The case of United Airlines shows that although they used strategies related to those of Coombs and Benoit, they did not succeed in diminishing the shitstorm and controlling the outrage of their stakeholders. However, as the analysis showed, this is not the blame of the strategies proposed by Coombs and Benoit, but rather a poor choice of strategies. Again, this can be seen as consequence of a legal team influencing the crisis communication, but none the less, the strategies chosen did not

have to effect that was intended, as United did not choose strategies in relation to the correct cluster that Coombs presents in SCCT. It is therefore important for crisis managers to view the organization from the perspective of the stakeholder, in order to evaluate the cluster which crisis belongs to and which strategies are the correct ones to use. Social media becomes a large aid in doing so, because the stakeholders voice their opinion publicly on the organizations social media pages. As a result of this, the choice of the correct cluster and strategy is still of major importance to the response that the stakeholders have to the crisis communication, especially on social media, where it is almost impossible to retract something, because the posts are shared immediately after being released.

One of the outcomes of social media is the popularity of sharing memes, a type of mockery and jokes aimed at the organization, which is something that neither Coombs nor Benoit addresses in their crisis communication strategies. The memes become a strengthening factor on rumors and misconceptions of a crisis, and will eventually also influence the future crisis history further. This means, that the theories of Coombs and Benoit cannot be used for diminishing the effect that memes can have on the reputation of the organization, and are therefore lacking in its efficiency as crisis communication tools for shitstorms.

As this paper uses only two cases for the critique and the interpretive approach to the problem statement, it is important to acknowledge that the generalizability of the paper is low, as these cases are unique and very specific, and that conclusions such as waiting with a response as long as VW can be beneficial because of the accusations being very clear and the risk of rumors are low, might not be the right choice in other similar cases. However, because the purpose of this paper is to take a critical look on the traditional theories of crisis communication for shitstorms, the critiques found in this paper is still valid, as the two cases did experience a shitstorm, and the strategies used resembled those of Coombs and Benoit.

What can be concluded is, that the phenomenon of shitstorms have brought along new social patterns such as memes, an increasing chance of spreading rumors and assumptions and a bigger need for a fast response time, that crisis managers must address, which the theories of Coombs and Benoit do not address. The theories are however still applicable as tools for handling shitstorms, because a shitstorm is a part of a crisis, meaning that they are applicable when the strategies address the aspects for handling a crisis. This is evident in the cases of Volkswagen and United Airlines, where strategies resembling those presented by Coombs and Benoit are used for handling the crisis, while the success is influenced by the phenomenon of shitstorms. Social media and shitstorms

challenge traditional theories on crisis communication on the aspect of how to deal with social patterns and emotions, because the traditional crisis communication theories are focused on the mechanics of a crisis, rather than the mechanics of the stakeholders who experience the crisis. With the emergence of social media, and the phenomenon of shitstorms, a new platform for communication has been born that organizations must acknowledge if they want to succeed in doing proper crisis communication.

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