

TK1951: AN ANATOMY OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on how Turkish Airlines (THY) managed its communication strategy after the unfortunate accident of TK 1951 on February 25, 2009 near Amsterdam Schiphol Airport. Evaluating the efforts in a framework, authors set out to discuss THY's performance in four important areas classified in eight headings: coordination of the messages, acknowledging uncertainty and taking responsibility, reaching the stakeholders and making use of online media tools. Hopefully, the results of this research will help THY and other airline companies to improve and develop their immediate crisis response strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper, while not being a comprehensive report over Turkish Airlines' (THY¹) crisis communication model, sets out to discuss the immediate communication attempts of the organization following the crash of the flight TK 1951 on February 25, 2009 near Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport. TK 1951 was THY's third accident on international flights in its history and the only one in the last three decades.

The information is collected through several resources, including Dutch and Turkish media as well as non-traditional online media and THY's international corporate website. The attempts of the organization and the messages are evaluated in a framework withdrawn from the literature (Seet, 2009; Ray, 1999; Curtin, 2005; ten Berge, 1990; Adubato, 2008; Henry, 2000):

- **Coordination of the messages:** Given today's media structure – such as 7/24 news networks, citizens journalists, the pace of internet journalism –, organizations are expected to “present a consistent and coordinated messaging strategy” (Seet, 2009, p.715) thus should be able to harmonize the messages originating from the crisis as “[i]n any crisis situation, the goal is to control and manage...the message, and the communication”. (Ray, 1999, p.244).
- **Keeping communications privileged:** A golden rule in crisis communication is to “tell it all and tell it fast” (ten Berge, 1999, p.79). Although in such a case, there are many other aspects that an organization

¹ THY started out as a state-owned corporation in 1933. The privatization process started in 1984. THY's shares went public in 2006. Right now, 50,88% of the shares are available in Istanbul Stock Exchange and the remaining 49,12% is owned by Privatization Administration (Privatization Administration, n.d.).

should be taking care of (such as reaching the crisis area, keeping the operations going on), communications should always be kept at the top of the agenda.

- **Communicating beyond the words:** Communication involves more than plain words. “The gestures, underlying attitudes, and physical presence or absence speak volumes” (Ray, 1999, p.109) are also important constituents of crisis communication.
- **Wider understanding of media:** “Media scrutiny is a fact of business life” (ten Berg, 1990, p.14), especially during a crisis situation. However, a narrow minded media focus will constrain an organizations’ ability to reach “new media platforms...[and] the net-savvy population”(Seet, 2009, p.717).
- **Stakeholder communications:** A crash in airline industry concerns more than the individuals who are directly involved in the accidents or in the organization. Therefore, the corporations are expected to “identify its relevant stakeholders, being sensitive to both unintended and diverse groups, and determine approaches for dealing with various groups” (Ray, 1999, p.245).
- **Becoming a reliable information resource:** During a crisis situation, lack of information will lead to rumors. “If facts are not available, then speculation will” (Curtin, 2005, p.47) take their place in media. Thus, an organization “should strive to be perceived as the most reliable source of information” (Ray, 1999, p. 109).
- **Taking responsibility:** “By playing for an honest [and] well-timed” (Adubato, 2008, p.20), an organization can reduce the damage of the crisis. A responsibility culture within the organization a responsibility culture “will likely influence appropriate actions” (Ray, 1999, p.244) which will make it possible to gain credibility in the eyes of the public.
- **Readiness to acknowledge uncertainty:** In a crisis situation involving the possibility of human causalities, it is important to “make a speedy rhetorical response in the first 60 to 120 minutes” (Seet, 2009, p.714). This first reaction might involve uncertainty which should be acknowledged by the authorities as in such a situation, and although it is acceptable to say ‘I don’t know’, lying, deceiving and misleading the public are faux pas of crisis communication (Henry, 2000, p.50)

This framework is not an exhaustive checklist of crisis management, or as Pauchant and Mitroff(1992) calls of a crash management, but is rather a ‘must-do’ list in respect to communication attempts after a crisis.

2. CRISIS: TK 1951 ON FEBRUARY 25, 2009

Turkish Airlines Flight 1951 left the Istanbul Ataturk Airport (IST) at 08:22 am on a scheduled flight to Amsterdam-Schiphol International Airport (AMS) with 128 passengers and 7 crew members on board (THY, n.d.) on February 25, 2009. The aircraft was a Boeing 737-800, one of the 51 THY keeps in service. There were

three crew members at the cockpit, apart from captain pilot, a safety pilot and a co-pilot under line training (THY, n.d.).

The flight was going flawlessly until TK 1951 started to descend. It was cleared for an approach to runway 18R at Schiphol. The Boeing 737 was on final approach, when it came down in a farm field some 1,5 km short of the runway threshold. The airplane broke in three but there was no fire (Aviation Safety Network, 2009). Hradecky (2009) describes the accident:

“According to a report by Dutch Television, emergency services had been deployed to runway 18R before the airplane went down. A fire commander said, that they were alerted of an accident on runway 18R, but when they approached runway 18R they could not see any airplane. They then drove a few kilometers to reach the actual accident site. According to pilots on the tower frequency TK-1951 did not declare emergency, they were rather cleared to land on runway 18R, read that clearance back correctly, then they were not heard anymore.”

The accident is still under investigation. The preliminary report of the Dutch Safety Board, underlines the irregularity occurred during the descent, at 1950 feet and explained the reason for the crash as following (Dutch Safety Board, 2009):

“At a height of 1950 feet the left radio altimeter suddenly indicated a change in altitude – from 1950 feet to - 8 feet – and passed this onto the automatic pilot... This change had a particular impact upon the automatic throttle system which provides more or less engine power... In practice, the plane responded to this sudden change as though it was at an altitude of just a few meters above the Polderbaan[18R] and engine power was reduced... As a result of the deceleration, the aircraft's speed was reduced to minimum flying speed (stalling situation) and warning signals (the steering column buzzes at an altitude of 150 metres) were given. The black box shows that full power was then applied immediately. However, this was too late to recover the flight, the aircraft was too low and, consequently, the Boeing crashed 1 kilomet[er] short of the runway.”

The first reaction from THY came later that day, from the Chairman of the Board, Candan Karlıtekin. He stated that there were 127 passengers and 7 crew members on the plane (Radikal, 2009). Although in his statement, he claimed 128 passenger numbers was stated earlier due to some passengers who weren't on board, THY declared the number as 128 on the website (THY, n.d.). Mr. Karlıtekin also mentioned that there were no casualties reported yet nor severely wounded passengers. THY, immediately, formed two crisis centers, one in Amsterdam and one in Istanbul (Radikal, 2009). According to most recent numbers, 9 souls perished, including all three pilots at the cockpit, a cabin crew and five passengers.

3. EVALUATION OF THE CRISIS COMMUNICATION: TIME TO FACE THE PUBLIC

After the crisis, THY changed its website design, used a black background, launched two information phone lines giving service in English, Turkish and Dutch. A flight was scheduled to take the relatives of the passengers to Amsterdam. In the following weeks, compensation was arranged, and a law firm was hired for legal purposes. Shortly speaking, in terms of logistics and technical crisis management, THY did everything that was expected from an airline company.

Coordination of the messages: Simply put, the messages “were not coordinated by THY” (Taraf, 2009). The CEO of THY, Temel Kotil, in his initial comments, claimed that there were no casualties and the pilot did a wonderful job in landing the plane safely (Taraf, 2009) two hours after the crash. However, 6 minutes after the crash, Dutch media sources started to give feeds to the public (NOS Journaal, 2009) and within 13 minutes, there were pictures of the crash going around in Twitter (NOS Journaal, 2009). During the time span between the accident and THY’s first reaction, rumors started about the causes of the crash and the number of casualties. Instead of trying to coordinate the messages, THY started giving inconsistent information to the public (NOS Journaal, 2009). With the involvement of Turkish authorities, namely the Minister of Transportation, Binali Yıldırım, and the Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, THY seemed to lose control over the messages. Yıldırım’s first press statements were TV interviews where he said “I am learning about everything with you[press corps]...I don’t know the number of casualties... Some say seven some say nine...We will see”(Taraf, 2009). In his speech, Mr. Erdoğan said: “The information I have right now is the phone call I had with my Minister of Transportation and with Mustafa Bahçecioğlu[a personal acquaintance on the flight]...Mr. Bahçecioğlu says three people died and Mr. Yıldırım says one.” (NTVMSNBC, 2009a). THY showed another attempt to coordinate the messages by creating the phone lines and calling a press meeting four hours after the crash (NOS Journaal, 2009), however, media and the authorities both in Turkey and in Netherlands continued giving out contradictory information, especially about the number of deaths and the reason for the crash. For, at least eight hours, THY couldn’t coordinate the messages. In fact, even weeks after the incident, it is possible to run into contradictory information about the crash – the number of people on board (134 or 135) and where exactly the plane crashed (ranging from 1 to 5 kilometers from 18R) on the web and on THY’s corporate website.

Keeping communications privileged: Despite the fact that the messages were contradictory and the reaction came late, THY kept communications at the top of its agenda. The phone lines kept working, there was information on the website and press releases were written. All THY officials were easily accessible after the crash, responding to the public (CNNTurk, 2009a).

Communicating beyond the words: THY was represented by the CEO and the Chairman (CNNTurk, 2009b). Corporate website started using a dark background with all the crash information available on the homepage. Moreover, Minister of Transportation, Director of Civilian Aviation Affairs, Turkey’s Ambassador in the Hague, Turkish and Dutch Prime Minister were personally involved in the communication processes (CNNTurk,

2009b). In other words, THY demonstrated its willingness to resolve the crisis and pass through this situation without damaging its reputation. However, the lack of coordination of the messages, these engagements did more damage than benefit to THY's crisis management.

Wider understanding of media: THY suffered from a narrow understanding of media. Their focus was mainly the Turkish traditional media – newspapers, televisions, radios and news agencies. But in reality, the online journalists were faster than their traditional colleagues and they managed to reach more audience (Verkade, 2009). Eksisozluk, a commonly used forum in Turkey had a few hundred entries about the accident during the first four hours following the incident. Bloggers were active and readers were commenting about the crash news on several websites. THY was virtually non-existent in blogosphere or in online media and tried to reach the viral audience via press releases on the corporate website.

Stakeholder communications: In an aviation accident, it is nearly impossible to identify all the stakeholders involved: people on board, their families, airport employers, corporation, authorities, general public, “airline industry” (Ray, 1999, p.1). The list is endless. As discussed above, the passengers and their families were given the necessary attention, however, THY spent all its remaining time solely focusing on saving company's reputation – defending its safety and maintenance regulations and its cockpit crew (Yenigun, 2009). The biggest flaw in this sense was THY's overlooking at the safety concerns of the industry. THY operates 51 Boeing 737 and another 54 is operated by other Turkish airline companies and until Directorate General of Civilian Aviation issued a circular (SHGM, 2009) on April 6, 2009; none of the parties involved in the process addressed the public concern about this aircraft model's safety.

Becoming a reliable information resource: Unreliability of the contradictory information bulks about the accident created another crisis for THY and its biggest shareholder, Turkish Government. Although Mr.Yıldırım claimed that “there were no contradictory information” (NTVMSNBC, 2009b) a day after the accident, THY couldn't succeed in spreading consistent information and becoming a reliable source. In fact, the updates about the incident were followed through either Dutch resources (Taraf,2009;Yenigun, 2009) or online media(Verkade, 2009) by the public and even by Turkish authorities.

Taking responsibility: Shortly after the accident, there had been news in the Dutch media, claiming “accidents happen more frequently with this airline[THY]” (NOS Headlines, 2009). On the other hand Turkish authorities started blaming the control tower at Schiphol arguing that the accident took place because of a “wake turbulence/wind shear” as a Boeing 757 landed 2 minutes prior to TK 1951 (Kaya & Gun, 2009). Even before the preliminary reports were released, the cockpit crew was declared as “heroes who saved many lives” (Yenigun, 2009), and Mr.Yıldırım accused several local and foreign news resources covering the accident for “trying to cast a suspicion on THY's success” (NTVMSNBC, 2009b). Considering the fact that the accident was caused by a manufacturing error and Boeing revised its regulations for 737 models (SHGM, 2009); all the parties involved were reluctant to take responsibility and started blaming each other – creating another wave of rumors and unreliable information about the real cause of the accident.

Readiness to acknowledge uncertainty: The question over the lives lost in the accident remained and over the cause of the accident remained uncertain. Although Mr. Karlıtekin in his initial comments acknowledged this uncertainty by saying that there were “no fatalities reported yet” (Radikal, 2009), his comment was misunderstood as there was no causality – which was supported by Mr. Erdoğan’s and Mr.Yıldırım’s remarks. Two hours after the crash (12.53pm), THY officially acknowledge the uncertainty and after an hour(1.27pm) Mr.Yıldırım did the same (Gazete Vatan, 2009). However, throughout the day, there were several numbers about the death toll. Regarding what caused the accident, THY only defended the pilots (Yenigun, 2009) and its maintenance regulations (CNNTurk, 2009a). Instead of taking a proactive action and acknowledging the uncertainty, THY chose to act reactively.

4. CONCLUSION

Daily Taraf’s(2009) headline summarizes THY’s crisis communication experience after TK 1951: “Plane Crashed, Ankara Smashed”. Although, they did a magnificent job in arranging the transportation of relatives, setting up the phone lines and arranging compensation, out of the eight criteria that the authors tried to evaluate the communication attempts, THY failed in six, and was found moderately successful in two. As of now, although the information about the accident is still available online, it is not reachable through a link on the corporate website. During the following days, THY decided to block the circulation of newspapers at the Istanbul Airport in order not to demoralize the passengers. It is not possible to find any information about a more recent crisis, a THY plane mistakenly landing at a military base in Georgia, on the corporate website either.

For a more efficient crisis communication strategy, the authors suggest THY and the airline companies to be aware of the plurality of the actors such as foreign media and government officials, to try coordinating the messages proactively during the crisis situations, to identify and prioritize all the stakeholders, to acknowledge uncertainty, to be ready to take responsibility, and lastly to keep the effects and efficiency of online social media tools in mind.

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