

# Crisis Communication in a Systems- and Medium Theoretical Perspective

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## Abstract

The academic field of crisis communication is more relevant now than ever before because of the digital media revolution, setting new standards for how to react to critics. But what is this academic field in a systems theoretical perspective? How can we understand sociological concepts like conflict, risk, trust, public opinion and mass media in regard to this field, and, vice versa, how can we understand crisis communication with sociologically systems theoretical concepts? This paper tries to answer these questions and thereby to contribute to the understanding of the field. Hereto the paper takes into account and discusses crisis communication in relation to the new medium environment and especially in regard to social media. The conclusion is that organizations now more than ever must be observant, reflected and responsive with regard to the public opinion, because of the new, more interactive and transparent medium environment. Also, organizations must be more consistent with their communicated values and strategies over time, or must be able to alter or modify them in such a way that they continuously manage to be seen as consistent, and thereby worthy of gaining trust in a hyper-dynamic social surrounding world.

## Introduction

Crisis communication is a field that has grown within the academic field of organizational analysis over the last 30 years. The field deals with how organizations can best explain themselves to stakeholders and the public when a crisis occurs. This is whether the crisis is self-imposed or externally imposed, but where the organization meets criticism for its behaviour in relation to the crisis. Most of the literature in the field is unscientific and characterized by experience-based, prescriptive consultant lists that explain how organizations should manage crises and their communication in relation to them. Since the early 1990s, this

literature has received an academic counterpart where actual theoretical frameworks are outlined, by which more descriptive analyses of what gives success in which situations can be conducted. The first and most original in the academic crisis communication field is William Benoit, who later scholars have crafted their theories around. Benoit (1995) essentially draws on classical rhetorical theories on the management of the question of guilt, which is then applied to the organizations' crisis communication. Benoit (1997: 179) presents a list with five major crisis communication techniques: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, corrective action and mortification (apologize for the act). Benoit's work is used in many specific analyses, not only by himself but also by many others, such as Jesper Falkheimer (2007), who analysed crisis communication in Sweden in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami disaster. Another one of the internationally recognized in the field is Timothy Coombs, who provides a list of seven main types of crisis communication. The list is very similar to Benoit's, but where Benoit is sender-oriented in his approach, Coombs (1999) is more receiver-oriented (Johansen & Frandsen 2007: 271-273). Denmark was relatively late in getting started with crisis communication, and in turn, one of the best academic contributions is by the two Danish researchers Winni Johansen and Finn Frandsen (2007). In their model they seek the rhetorical arena, to be both sender- and recipient-oriented, which they understand using the concept of the multi-vocal.<sup>1</sup> Although the field of crisis communication has thus received an academic field, it still seems to be lacking a solid sociological foundation. There is no further elaboration or integration of the essential concepts of risk, trust, conflict, public opinion, mass media, social media or communication. Here Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems seems obvious, not least because Luhmann's theory is based on communication. Such a sociological observation of the crisis communication field could work as complementing and providing the field with theoretical depth and sharpness, and not least help to distance the field's predominance of prescriptive lists of what to do in order to avoid taking responsibility. To view the crisis between organizations and their surrounding social world using a systems theoretical framework would maybe help to cross the border and observe that organizations must adapt to that environment and perhaps learn something, enriching both the organization and the society. Such an angle as *effective communication* would probably be called by Habermas an instrumental and/or strategic form of communication. It seems to be a basic conception underlying the field that if an organization can manage to communicate effectively, i.e. according to the lists of how-to-do, it can recover from any crisis with an intact reputation – and that's it. This paper will, in all its brevity, try to establish a complementary theory by drawing on a number of Luhmann's concepts. It cannot stand alone, but is a supplement that helps with systems theoretical concepts that can counteract the simplifications, which is accomplished by the idea of effective communication.

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<sup>1</sup> I have not given an exhaustive overview of academic crisis communication, for example I have left out Heath (2006).

## Contradiction and Conflict

Luhmann (1995: 370) attributes the doctrine of contradictions to immunology. The system of society protects not against change, but against no longer environmentally adequate behaviours: "The immune system protects not structure but autopoiesis, the system's closed self-reproduction" (ibid., 372). A conflict occurs when a contradiction is communicated (ibid., 388). Conflicts arise, then, when communication takes up a contradiction in itself and contradicts it, or in other words, when one communicative element is linked to another communicative element by contradicting it. It is not the differing interests, but that they are communicated that is a conflict. Any communication produces a bifurcation between yes and no to proposals of meaning, so that conflict and consensus constantly are reproduced as alternatives (Luhmann 2007: 306). However, a no does not always produce a conflict, for example, one might walk out of a store again without buying. But a *no* often sharpens the tone, and provokes, and one is tempted to see the other person as an opponent. To tune into the other person communicatively as an opponent gives birth to the conflict as a system driven by a negative double contingency: "I will not do what you want if you do not do what I want" (Luhmann 1995: 389). One acts aggressively, defensively, or protectively, giving the other only limited variation possibilities as, for instance, to form coalitions and search for resources for resistance (Luhmann 2007: 308). When conflicts arise, they take over for a while the autopoiesis, i.e. the continuation of the communication (Luhmann 1995: 389). In this way, conflicts are social systems formed out of occasions that are given in other systems not in the form of subsystems, but in the form of parasites (ibid.). For a time they draw all attention and all communication contributions to themselves, whereby they block the host systems. Conflict systems are highly integrative because they draw all action into the context of an opposition within the perspective of opposition (ibid.: 390). Thereto, Luhmann (2007: 308) points to this with a formal definition of integration, which says that "integration is a restriction of individual freedom", and can clearly see that conflicts are likely to integrate: "For as an opponent, as an enemy, one in a conflict has far less variation possibilities, far fewer behavior possibilities: One must be careful, one must consider how to sharpen one's own weapons, and how to do the opponent's weapons blunt, how to protect oneself, how to prevent and how to attack" (ibid.: 309). Conflicts die out when they no longer can attract contributions, when contributors all get tired and bored of arguing and stop struggling - time goes by, one moves on to other themes (Luhmann 1995: 392). Conflicts are thus communicative processes in the social system and their function is an immunization against the probability of cessation of the system's autopoiesis (ibid.: 384). The court plays a special role, as it on the one hand increases the opportunities for conflicts and simultaneously works against a violent settlement of conflicts (ibid.: 375). For Luhmann, conflict plays an important role in the social world, as in the immune system, but at the same time it is clear that conflicts also have destructive effects on host systems. Conflicts take up the host systems' resources and attention to which the relationship between the contending organizations is harmed (ibid.: 390).

Crisis communication is defined as a double crisis (Johansen & Frandsen 2007: 79), first somebody observes something as a crisis, something goes wrong, then there is a communication crisis where an organization is attacked and defends itself rhetorically. Here I define a crisis as a system external observation, an observation of the surrounding world, made by a communication contributor, which alerts the community to a phenomenon to be acted in relation to. The phenomenon may be a tsunami, a SAS aircraft that crashes during landing, drawings of Muhammad, an oil spill, or a young giraffe that is put down in a Danish zoo. In the first instance, the crisis is an internal communicative event, a communicative indication of a system external event that is observed (communicated) as a crisis. After that, the crisis may cause a conflict if the communicative contribution is linked to by a new communicative element contradicting (negating) a person's or organization's handling of the crisis. If the emergency preparedness in relation to a tsunami is criticized, or if the steps taken by SAS in relation to an aircraft crash are criticized, and this communication continuously attracts communication contributions a conflict emerges as an autopoietic system. The Muhammad cartoons may in this perspective be seen as a first communication element, while the communication of the 'no' to them is the contradiction that gives birth to the Muhammad conflict (the cartoon crisis) as an autonomous system. It is clearly seen how the conflict integrates any statement concerning the crisis into the conflict, and how all contributors are forced into the reduced options - as in the Iraqi conflict, so clearly defined by George Bush: "you're either with us, or against us". The crisis communication concept in this context can be defined as an organizations' rhetorical efforts (contributions) with regard to emergent conflict systems. The question now is how the social landscape in which the emergent conflict systems are produced and reproduced can be observed.

### **Risk and the Emergent Conflict Systems**

To clarify the organizational latitude, we now consider the concept of *risk*. Luhmann (2005: 21) defines the concept of risk by distinguishing it from *danger* seen as the counter concept of risk. The distinction implies that uncertainty occurs in relation to future losses, which gives two possibilities: if the potential loss is observed as a consequence of a decision, we talk about risk, because the loss is attributed to a decision, on the other hand, if the potential loss is seen to be caused by external factors, is attributed to the outside world, we talk about danger (ibid., 22). One is always in danger: of course one can decide in relation to one's own actions, but only in the sense that one's actions places one in a dangerous situation. That one chooses to walk down one street over the other when going home from work, and is hit on the head by a roof tile is a danger and no risk, as there is not accepted any risk to achieve any benefits - you have just chosen between two equivalent possibilities. If risk is going to be attributed to a decision, it must be possible to distinguish clearly between alternatives with regard to possible losses, so that one subsequently can regret a decision (ibid., 23). For instance, you know that there is a risk of falling roof tiles on the shortest route home, but regardless you decide to go this route rather

than a longer but safer one. The distinction between risk and danger enables a selection of both sides of the form, but not at the same time. Selecting risk makes it possible to forget the danger, like the selection of danger makes it possible to forget the profits a risky decision might provide (ibid., 24). In addition, it is of course also a decision not to decide (ibid., 28), which is why organizations always want to be observed (judged) in the light of their decisions. Organizations are systems consisting in decision communications (ibid., 188; Luhmann 2006, 63), and any of their communications are risky because something may be overlooked, which later can prove to be relevant (Luhmann 2005: 189).

Crisis communication appears so that an organization's decisions (its risk calculations), are observed by others as a danger, which is communicated as a crisis and must be observed by the organization as a conflict between it and those who criticize it. Risk Management is a second-order self-observation – the organization must select something and nothing else in the light of the probability of loss. It must be observing itself in relation to unknown futures and thus reflect on its own decision communication. Its own internal immune system must be intact, so that internal conflicts can emerge and run and liquidate behaviours, which are no longer adequate – before the societal immune system comes into force and the organization has a conflict with its surrounding world. But whatever ways the organization establishes to reduce uncertainty, e.g. collective decisions, project descriptions, external experts, internal specialist departments etc., it may not achieve more than to defend its decisions with that it did everything to qualify them. It is an illusion that risks can be brought under total control (ibid., 192).

In a risk perspective, conflict systems emerge within organizations with the function of acting as an immune system when decisions (risk) are observed as a threat to the organization. Likewise, conflict systems emerge between organizations and their external social world when organizations' decisions (risk behaviour) is observed as a danger by social systems in their environment, which can be seen as an activation of the societal immune system. Organizations with a strong immune system will in this perspective be more adaptable than systems that are less confrontational. Likewise, it must be assumed that organizations with a weak immune system are at higher risk of exposure to the societal immune system than systems that are more reflective, and can handle and perhaps even initiate internal conflicts.

## Trust and Emergent Conflict Systems

Trust is another key concept in relation to crisis communication, since the organization on the one hand, through its crisis communication, tries to gain trust and on the other hand must constitute trust to certain decisions itself, e.g. the triggering of certain public opinions, that external parties will come to rescue and/or will sympathize with its crisis statements. The reflective concept of *trust* is, according to Luhmann (2000b, 1979: 19), *confidence*.<sup>2</sup> Both concepts refer to expectations that can lead to disappointment. Confidence is the most common, e.g.

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<sup>2</sup> In Luhmann (1979), *Vertrautheit* is translated into familiarity and not confidence.

that the car does not break down, or that one will not be vilified in the press. We cannot think of everything, organizations and we have a limited attention span. Decisions lose their decision actuality and become habits in a world we are confident with. The decision actuality is often only re-actualized in conflicts. If we do not consider alternatives when we decide, it is related to confidence, while trust requires a risky situation (reflexivity). If one selects an action over others due to the probability of being disappointed by others' selections, then we have a trust situation. In the case of confidence, one will react to disappointment with external attribution. In the case of trust, one must consider an internal attribution and perhaps regret the selection of trust. It's not about probability calculation, but about whether the disappointment depends on one's own previous selections or not (Luhmann 1995, 2000b, 1979).

There is not an independent function system of trust, but in a functionally differentiated society all function systems depends on trust, as a response to the risks and uncertainties this form of community causes. There are many selections to make and nothing is certain – the present future will not just be transformed into an equally formed future present (Luhmann 1979). If one were to provide a code for trust it would be trust ] distrust. An example would be a family often walking in Copenhagen Zoo. The family has a confidential relationship to the zoo, but then reads in the newspaper that the zoo has behaved in a way that the family cannot accept, after which they stop coming in the zoo. The family has started to be reflected in relation to the zoo and have changed their confidential relationship to a relationship of trust and thereto selected mistrust. It may now be that the zoo succeeds in explaining themselves in a manner whereby the organization wins the family's trust and it begins to come in the zoo again. Luhmann (1979) linked the achievement of trust to self-representation, respectively the history of self-representation, so that the one who shows consistency over time will be able to gain trust: "He who stands by what he has allowed to be known about himself, whether consciously or unconsciously, is worthy of trust" (Luhmann 1979: 39). Trust relates to continuing one's self-representation and feeling bound by one's own history of self-representation. In a dynamic environment, this does not mean that one can just remain as one usually is in the literal sense, but rather that one succeeds in adapting oneself to the dynamic environment in a uniform and stable manner, e.g. following a set of values. One must therefore adapt within acceptable limits and show continuity in behaviour under difficult and changing conditions (Luhmann 1979). Crisis systems emerge and paralyze organizations when parts of the surrounding world lose their confidentiality with an organization and mistrust is selected.

Taking into account the concepts of conflict, risk and trust, organizations always have to consider crisis communication when deciding. A given decision must be defensible, taking into account the risks of future crises, in such a way that it is probable that the organization keeps the trust of its stakeholders. When emergent crisis systems are observed from the perspective of trust, organizations' histories of self-presentation and values become visible and evaluated in relation to present opinions about these values, and the organizations' congruence with these values in its historical self-presentation. Of course, organizations cannot know the future present, but continually they can re-actualize the actuality of decisions and take into

account what is focused on in the present in their social environment. In addition, they can organize in accordance with the principles of value management to display a congruent history of self-presentation that makes it possible to defend present actions in the future.

## Organizations and Function Systems

Risk-taking and trust provides advantages at the societal level. The advantages are especially with regard to temporary benefits. In the modus of risk, possibilities are tested that would not be tested without risk-taking, and which nobody can know beforehand will succeed or not. When risks are taken and result in success, new social structures are produced and new possibilities are created, for instance, investments in a new kind of medicine that keeps bodies alive, psyches happy and lets the risk-taking organization earn money and gain a positive reputation. Modern society is built on trust, e.g. trust in the value of money, in scientific results and in legitimate political power (Luhmann 1979: 49). Also, it takes trust to have money in the bank, children in the kindergarten, your body in the traffic etc. Both trust and risk requires reflectivity, i.e. awareness and communication about alternatives with different consequences for the present and future. Organizations have a primary linkage to a single function system – companies to the economic system because it is the bottom line that counts, schools to the education system as it is teaching/learning and exams that count, and parties to the political system as it is votes that provide power. However, in the functionally differentiated society an organization must be able to communicate in all society's different symbolically generalized communication media (SGCM). A company therefore must be able to communicate in the SGCM of science when it tries to convey the probable effects of a new product, in the SGCM of education, when it tries to recruit suitable candidates, and for example in the SGCM of the judicial system where it tries to stay on the right side of the law.<sup>3</sup> On this basis, organizations build internal complexity in the form of various departments and roles to be able to communicate in the different functional systems' SGCM. Each of the function systems are in closed in the *fact dimension* and can only distinguish communications in one SGCM such as money or truth, but never more – they are all one-eyed, but in return they are open in the *social dimension*, so everybody can contribute to them and be included. This also means that every person and organisation that wants to be included in the modern society must be able to handle the function systems and their codes. It is just the opposite with regard to organizations. They are open in the *fact dimension* and must be able to communicate in all SGCM, but in turn they are closed in the *social dimension*, so that only members can contribute to their communication.

Organizational communication, and in particular crisis communication, in this society must prepare for observations from the angle of any function system. In addition, morals and ethics must be taken into account – even though they have not generated an autonomous function system, because of substantial disagreement

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<sup>3</sup> See Luhmann (2006: 117) about life story, (1989: 76) about health and (ibid: 64) about justice.

about what is acceptable and what is not. But perspectives of moral and ethics are always lurking and released as observation optics from different organizations, movements and parts of the fragmented public.

## Mass Media and Emergent Conflict Systems

Mass media, which Luhmann (2000) regards as a functional system, is an important part of the social landscape that the emergent crisis systems and the organizations' crisis communication are observed in. Luhmann's book on mass media is called "The reality of the mass media", which has a double meaning that the mass media both creates a reality (that we perceive as our common reality) and itself has a reality (their own organizational issues). The mass media do not transcend reality, but create a reality that is presented to the audience. Luhmann (2000: 2) defines mass media as "all those institutions of society which make use of copying technologies to disseminate communication". It is the mechanical manufacturing of a product as the bearer of communication, which has led to the differentiation of the particular function system. The mass media system decouples itself from other communication by ruling out interaction between sender and receiver by the interposition of technology. To print a letter to the editor of the newspaper is the newspaper's own selection. The mass media system has its own symbolically generalized communication medium which is *information* and its own code: information | not information. The individual mass media organizations each manage the code according to their own programs and decisions. The mass media system consists of organizations such as publishers, newspapers and television stations that internally determine what is information and should be disseminated. There are huge differences between, for instance, newspapers in regard to what is considered to have information value. Organizations that need to become visible in society must connect to the mass media. However, the media organizations are self-determined and select their own conditions for what to publish and how to angle it. The mass media are among the most enthusiastic contributors to conflict systems, and are often directly them who initiates them. In other words, in most mass media it has information value if it can be insinuated or demonstrated that an organization is a danger or appears as arousing distrust. If organizations' crisis communications are to get disseminated, through mass media organizations transmission, they have to meet the criteria of information value.

With the introduction of electronic media, society became more transparent (Meyrowitz 1985), which for organizations not only meant better communication opportunities, but also that their backstage was reduced and that their decisions were easier to observe. This makes organizational communication more risky and places greater demands on their self-presentation in relation to sustainability, ethics, psychosocial work environment, leadership, service, etc., and thus generally seen in relation to the organization's decisions. Decisions will always be evaluated retrospectively and it will rarely be taken into account what information actually led to the risky decisions, but only what possibly could have been known, as well as what we have in the meantime found out (Luhmann 2005). What organizations



communicate (e.g. brands, values and goals) will be evaluated in regard to what they actually do, which will be perceived as decided.

## Emergent Crisis Systems and Public Opinion

The public must be observed as a fragmented and not as one large discursive community; it spreads out across the globe, in many different social systems and media platforms (Habermas 1984, 2006). This means that the reception of organizations in the public will not be homogenous and that the stakeholders will not form as a single homogeneous group. The concept of public opinion, according to Luhmann, is described as a certain *look* that sets a boundary between public and private (Baecker 1996; Qvortrup 1998). What is observed as public can be discussed openly, it has public interest. Firstly, a border is drawn – for instance, it is up to Keminovas' how they run their own business. Secondly, the border is crossed – when it appears that they are selling herbicides in South America, that are prohibited in the EU. The public can thus be described as an observation boundary between private and public that draws a border, which is immediately crossed – something is published. It is a focus, which is moved around. Public opinion is about subjects of general interest and what is of public interest often triggers the emergence of conflict systems. Public opinion makes thematic shifts, for instance, from economy to moral: Keminovas is a profitable business, but it is immoral to sell banned poisons, spread by workers without safety equipment. Public opinion cannot be calculated in advance, you cannot know what it is going to take up next or whatever it lands on, or when it fluctuates: "First the evil Jyllands-Posten, which mocks Muslims", but then, "enough is enough with the Muslims ". On this background, Dirk Baecker (1996) defines public opinion as: the decision of what cannot be decided. Public opinion is a special view that oscillates between observing something and observing itself: shortly after something is taken up in the public opinion the public begins to observe itself: isn't this too corny, or is this the right angle. This is echoed in the mass media: the electronic media take up something which newspapers do not just comment on as a subject, they also discuss how it was communicated, how it was angled etc. in the electronic media (Qvortrup 1998). The conflict runs out of the hands of the organization and it quickly becomes other people's opinions that are under discussion and have implications for the formation of public opinion. As public opinion can trigger the emergence of conflict systems, public opinion also after a while, can stop to contribute to a given conflict system resulting in the ending of its autopoiesis. This happens, for instance, in connection with a shift of theme, or a shift from external observation to self-observation, or simply because of the emergence of a new and now more interesting and current crises begins to capture the attention of the public opinion. Organizations can learn from all conflicts, big and long-lived or small and short-lived, by using the external observation from the public opinion as a second order self-observation, letting the organization observe itself and its environment in the light of the general public (Vallentin 2005: 38).

## Effect and Stakeholder Identity

To understand communication crises it is important to free oneself from primitive basic assumptions about what communication is. Mostly, communication provides an effect, but not an effect that can be directed, since it is up to the addressees to select understanding (= reception) and this fact applies to all parties. The situation is like when you quarrel at home, everyone would rather quit, but no one lets others direct him or her to stop. In the same way, an internal emergent conflict system in a family continues until no one contributes to it any more, and so it is with conflicts on the larger scale. In addition, the entire societal dynamics come into action when an organization becomes a negative object of public opinion. Everybody has an opinion and the mass media willingly convey even the most incredible views and interpretations, which in turn themselves become the object of public opinion, to which other mass media organizations' coverage and perspectives become a competing focus to the organization's crisis communications. Journalists are researching, stakeholders commenting, experts interpret consequences as more or less self-fulfilling prophecies and the fragmented public forms its opinions. Stakeholders at all levels become reflective about their own opinion and review their self-image, considering what the public opinion (the decision of the undecidedly) will land on. The questions they ask themselves are whether they still want to be among those who have shares in, work in, or buy in the conflict-affected organization. Does the affinity with the organization still fit with the desired self-image, and is it possible to maintain one's self-presentation in a congruent and positive way, if one stays in the affiliation? The risk of continuing to show trust to the organization can easily seem too big, and too many people who before the conflict had a confident relation to the organization (a un-reflected relation) because of its positive reputation and solid services, might suddenly become reflected and might not choose to trust the organization. The public opinion is, however, only a meaning, if it is to have an effect and actually harm the organization, it must be addressed within a function system. This means that policy makers need to legislate against the organization, the court must judge it, the customers must stop buying its products, and shareholders sell out, before the organization actually gets injured. If the organization has a customer base of political consumers, lifestyle customers or is dealing with something that involves a risk for the customers, such as flying them in machines high above the ground, it is clear that the probability of economic, legal, or political consequences are big. Thus, the effect of bad publicity is very differentiated, depending on what the crisis is about and also depending on the market area. An organization's finances and the trust in it is only relatively connected, depending on whether its brand is a discount product, a quality product, or a lifestyle product, and in relation to if the buyer segment is at all sensitive to public opinion, or whether it is self-defining and perhaps even lives in blissful opposition to the public opinion. Even incongruence between communication and action is no guarantee that customers let a product down – some segments only think about price while others tend more to be political consumers.

## Emergent Crisis Systems and Social Media

Generally, digital media and especially social media have an interactive structure for communication, which differentiates them from the mass media. In social media, everybody with an account, for instance, on Twitter or Facebook can take part in the communication. This means that the rhetorical arena is now much more inclusive than it was before. There are numerous examples where customers have tried to make claims to organizations and did not get help, but then via the social media have started campaigns triggering conflict systems *saying no* to the treatment they got from the company. Most famous is musician Dave Carroll who said that his \$3,500 guitar was broken while in United Airlines' custody. According to him, he did complain three times with no other response than indifference – then he made a song and put it on YouTube, got millions of views, and then the company gave him an apology and compensation, but did not succeed in saving their image.<sup>4</sup> I even made an experiment myself, when a member of my family, a young woman living alone with her child received a bill for 3000 Danish kroner more than she should have had from her telephone company. She tried to call them and they said that she would get her money back in two months in connection with the next bill – but she did not have the money and had to go to the bank to borrow the money in order to live. Then I wrote on the company's Facebook profile that the company borrowed from its costumers and told the story. After 20 minutes the company responded that she would get her money back right away (Tække 2013).

Even though the rhetorical arena is now much bigger and much more inclusive, it does not mean that we know the mechanisms or laws of what Jenkins (et al. 2013) calls spreadability, which in using a biologism has been called *go viral*. For both companies and people, social media means social ambivalences, since we do not know their communicative infrastructure, i.e. the algorithms deciding the dissemination of messages (Tække 2013, 2014). Content that succeeds in spreading over the Internet must somehow catch interest, be something that other people feel that they themselves get something out of, like social capital or social identity, making them “Like”, “Share” or “Retweet” the content. Comparing this medium revolution to former media revolutions, the problem basically is that adequate norms for the new medium environment are not developed in the first period after the introduction of a new medium (Meyrowitz 1985; Tække 2013, 2014). So the societal norms for how to communicate are still not fully developed in relation to our new media environment. At this moment in time it appears just as unpredictable as public opinion itself! Contrary to the news criterion of the mass media, we cannot be sure about the criterion of ordinary people's interactions on social media. But we now – more than ever – know that it is risky to communicate at all in an environment where we cannot predict how far our messages reach, who will get them or when they will get them, if they will get them at all. Even though organizations run a risk of not responding positively to a complaint on a social medium, the complainer cannot know if others are going to backup, ignore or will

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<sup>4</sup> See Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_Breaks\\_Guitars](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Breaks_Guitars) (United Airlines' stock price fell 10%, costing stockholders about \$180 million in value). See the YouTube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YGc4zOqozo>

see the complaint at all. On the other hand, organizations cannot know if a complaint begins to echo on social media and grow to a communication crisis.

### **Crisis Communication and Social Media**

Coombs (2012) tries with the concept *paracrisis* to frame the problem, helping organizations to navigate in the new medium environment. Paracrisis is defined as “a publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior” (ibid. 409). It is only a crisis *thread*, but a thread that could escalate into a crisis; it is a kind of a warning. If organizations make environmental scanning of various social media it will help them in identifying paracrisis. If the organizations can identify complaints that have the potential of becoming a communication crisis, they can act before it grows. With social media, the number of people with a voice is increased and, according to Coombs, organizations must monitor the number of messages linking to the paracrisis. When responding to a paracrisis, trying to prevent it from growing to a real crisis, they must consider a strategy, which according to Coombs (2012: 412) can be one of three: refute, reform, or refuse. If they *refute* they must hope for other stakeholders are going to support their position. If they *reform* they must take into account the cost of the change and consistency with organizational strategy. If they *refuse* their management does acknowledge the challenge and hope the paracrisis disappears due to lack of attention.

### **Concluding Discussion: Conflict Systems and Social Media**

From a systems theoretical view, what Coombs calls paracrisis can be observed as *small no's* to the behaviour of an organization. If the organization is open for them as irritations, as second order observations of their behaviour, they can continually learn and thereby perform more adequately to their surrounding social world. According to Luhmann, we do not communicate to achieve consensus, but to increase our sensibility to changes in our surrounding world. If an organization allows internal conflicts, it has an internal immune system, caching many small conflicts before they grow and become problems in relation to the external world, i.e. trigger the societal immune system (a conflict system on the societal level). Organizations need to have communicated values and strategies to make themselves calculable to their surrounding world and have a self-presentation and self-presentation history consistent and congruent with their values and strategies. In the new medium environment this is truer now than ever before, but even this mostly transparent environment provides new possibilities for organizations. If the internal immune system does not eliminate behaviour incongruent with the stated values and the history of self-presentation the mostly sensitive social-media-based social environment probably will find it out. A critic in a social medium is a contribution to the organization's second order self-observation, helping it to see itself in the view of public opinion – or in what could become the opinion of important parts of its stakeholders. If the organization asks about the meaning in a respectful tone and tries to link to the meaning, explaining itself and its motives, a constructive interaction is initiated – and trust is either maintained within the

relation, or at least tried to be established. Most conflicts grow because organizations either link in an indifferent or rude manner, or because organizations do not pay attention at all. In the new medium environment, organizations must be aware of what is going on in social media and respond and orientate adequately, e.g. moving the misbehaving organization member to other work than the contact with the stakeholders. If we talk about a mistake, or a discrepancy with regard to the organizational value and history of self-presentation, the organization must answer with reform. For example, if a campaign is in disharmony with the communicated values of the organization (see Coombs 2012 examples). If the meaning of the critical contribution is in disharmony with the values and history of self-presentation of the organization, the organization must either initiate second order learning (double loop learning, Argyris & Schön 1996) and alter its values and strategies, or try to explain its consistence with its basic values. An example of the latter was when Arla gave an apology to the Middle East countries during the Mohammed cartoon crisis, which was in accordance with its stated values. In the mean time, many stakeholders in Denmark felt harmed by the apology and lost confidence in Arla and selected mistrust in their new mode of reflectivity. In this case, Arla through their company weblog let their highest spokesmen explain their consistency with their values in interaction with stakeholders and won the public opinion back despite their strategy of refuse (see Tække 2008). The killing of Marius the giraffe at Copenhagen Zoo is another example, because it was in line with the communicated values, which was explained through the mass media – and people still go to the Zoo in Copenhagen. The conclusion is, that it's all about risk and trust, i.e. about being consistent with the communicated values and history of self-presentation on the one hand and, on the other hand, to stay in contact with the stakeholders through social media and perform self-observations through public opinion – reflect, decide, and be responsive to the critical contributions. But if the organizations cannot handle this, the immune system of society will take them out of the social evolution. Now, with the new medium environment, society is more observant and more synchronized with itself than ever before, and only organizations that can adapt to the new conditions will be able to maintain themselves. In the medium environment, including digital media organizations must be more consistent with their communicated values over time and/or able to alter or modify them in such a way that they continuously manage to stay observed as consistent, and thereby worthy of gaining trust in a hyper dynamic social surrounding world.

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