Media and Crisis communication

Do frames align in cases of extraordinary crises? A qualitative analysis of FOCUS online and Bild’s coverage of the 2015-Germanwings airplane crash

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ABSTRACT

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The media and crisis communication of a company operate according to different logics. The media are known to be more entertainment driven, while the company tries to remain trustworthy and publishes information only once it is confirmed. Does this difference in logic and in framing a crisis persist when the crisis occurs without any warning signs?

Different crisis life-cycle models exist of which two of them are presented and discussed within this study. Additionally, media framing, media logic theory and crisis communication theory are further going to be clarified in order to identify if the difference in framing an extraordinary crisis persist.

One of the addressed research questions aims to determine if there was a difference in covering the event between Germanwings and two German media, Bild and FOCUS online. The objective of the second research question is to discern if there was a frame-alignment between the two different types of media, Bild and FOCUS online.

The results show that Bild and FOCUS online applied different frames while covering the event. While Bild merely focused on emotional stories and speculations over the cause of the accident, FOCUS online based their coverage on facts and statements. Furthermore, FOCUS online aligned their frames with Germanwings crisis reportage, whereas Bild merely covered according to the media logic theory.

Keywords: Crisis communication, media framing, online communication, online media, media logic theory, qualitative analysis
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1. Introduction

Coombs (2011) and Altheide (2014) affirm that the media and the crisis communication of a company operate according to different logics. This study investigates whether the difference in framing such a situation remains when an extraordinary event occurs. When researching examples of the media's coverage of organizational crises, it manifests that their framing strongly differs from the company’s crisis communication strategy. The need to communicate for both parties is diverse because of their different logics. The media, in order to survive in the pool of online magazines, have to circulate the information as quickly as possible. Moreover, the media due to economic reasons have to sell their content, which is why their approach is driven towards entertainment rather than simply informing. The company, on the other hand, first ensures that the content is right before communicating to the public in order to appear credible. Does this difference in logic remain when an unexpected event occurs? The Germanwings airplane crash of March 24, 2015, can be considered an unexpected event that disrupted an organization’s operation (Coombs, 2011). This event occurred without any warning signs, and the organization, just like the media, had to adapt quickly to this situation. How did they frame this particular event? This study will identify the degree of difference in framing a crisis by the media and a company when sudden and unsuspected events occur.

Presentation of the “Germanwings” case

This thesis will study an explicit case in order to identify if the differences in the corporate and media framing of a crisis persist during widespread unsuspected events. News reports and crisis communication of the Germanwings crash of March 24-30, 2015, will be analyzed in order to see if there was a difference in framing the event.

The following summary, taken from the German newspaper "Die Zeit" (Stockrahm, GmbH & Hamburg, 2016), resumes the nature of the crash:

On the March 24, 2015, 4U9525 took off from Barcelona, Spain. It was traveling to Düsseldorf, Germany with 144 passengers, including a German school group and six crew members on board the Airbus A320-211. They departed at 10 o'clock GMT +1 and reached the cruising altitude at 10:30 am. At this particular moment, the pilot went to the bathroom, leaving the co-pilot alone and closed the cockpit door, such as the regulations prescribe. A few seconds later the co-pilot reduced the altitude by 30 meters to 11,600
meters and activated the diving mode. This made the plane plummet. Meanwhile, the voice recorder registered the pilot trying to get back into the cockpit by knocking on the door. Unfortunately, due to security regulations established after the terror attack of 9/11, the door cannot be opened from the outside. The control center on the ground tried unsuccessfully to reach the cockpit. At 10:40 am, the tape recorded the warning signal “Terrain, Terrain, Pull Up, Pull Up” which means that the pilot or co-pilot has to make a sharp ascent the plane otherwise it will crash. The tape ends at 10:41 am and the Airbus crashed into the Alpes in the South of France. All occupants died instantly upon impact.

The cause of the crash is unknown during the first 24 hours, which makes it more difficult to report the crisis to the public. In order for the different parties to fully understand what happened, they need to find the voice recorder and the black box, which records all the technical aspects of the plane. Until they have these tools, no one will know the cause of the incident. Since the area where the crash occurred is in the mountains, between 1,600-2,000 above sea level, it made it harder to recover the required tools. Mitroff (2006) defines this state as ethical and technical uncertainty, when it is not clear if the event occurred due to the lack of human competence or because of technical defaults. In order to implement a successful crisis communication, companies want to be sure about the content they are publishing. If the organization is not congruent with their strategy, they can appear dishonest and the stakeholders, such as the public, would not trust them, which will have a huge impact on their reputation.

The media, on the other hand, are more interested in entertaining the public, creating drama and airing fast information. Mitroff (2006, p.23) claims that “the media attempt to create moral certainty both consciously and unconsciously in order to soothe the underlying emotions and anxieties of the public.”

This difference in framing an event is critical since the public will have to choose a side and most of the time, they will believe the media over the company’s coverage of the event (Mitroff, 2005).

The Germanwings airplane crash was an extraordinary event, which can be considered a crisis, according to Coombs’ (2007) crisis communication theory. The long period of uncertainty makes it relevant for this study, such as the lack of warning signs for the occurrence of the event. It gave the media space for speculation over the reason of the plane crash and elevated the problematic for an efficient crisis communication, Mitroff (2006) states. The crashed airplane belonged to the low budget airline Germanwings, which is a subdivision of Lufthansa. The crash of 4U9525 is the first crisis for Lufthansa in 20 years.
and the first for Germanwings. The holding company Lufthansa was heavily affected, which is why they were deeply involved in the crisis communication from the beginning.

This study will analyze media texts from two German online magazines FOCUS online and Bild. 64 articles will be compared to the online crisis communication of Lufthansa and Germanwings during the first week after the incident occurred. Did Bild and FOCUS online have a different discourse before and after the press conference? Did they align their frames or were they different from the beginning of the crash? By comparing the difference in framing an extraordinary event, this study will seek to fill gaps in previous research by finding lapses in frame alignment research of spectacular crises.
2. Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to identify if the differences in framing a crisis by the concerned organization and online news outlets persist if the event has a tremendous impact on a global scale. This study analyzes the news coverage of the incident by two German newspapers, *FOCUS online* and *Bild*. Their articles are going to be compared to *Germanwings* and *Lufthansa* press conferences and online communication. The articles published by *Bild* and *FOCUS online* were selected using certain criteria: they should have at least one page and include information about the crash. *Germanwings* press conferences are the main items for the analysis, as the press releases mostly summarised the conferences.

As previously mentioned, the communications produced by the media and organization differ in their way of framing a crisis. As Miller and Riechert (2000) mention, there is a remarkable difference between the media’s and organization’s approach to framing a crisis. While the organization frames their communication themselves by showing their side of the story, the media adapt and shift the frames presented by the corporation. As Holladay (2010) underlines, the media will seek for alternative information sources, if they do not get information from the corporation. This can be fatal for the company, as the public will believe them to be dishonest and failing to control the situation. The company’s response within the first days shapes the event, its representation by the media, and guides its understanding by the public.

However, the demand for instant, around-the-clock information coupled with the rapid development of online platform, leads to a rethinking of communication strategies. This is especially true in crisis communication where the research into online media influence is still quite limited. When looking at the coverage, the question relates to whether the media communicate the event by applying frames different from those employed by the organization, or was there a frame alignment. In order to fill this gap, this study is going to focus on online media’s coverage of a crisis, frame alignment to see if there are discrepancies with the online media’s representation compared to the company’s online crisis communication, thus answering the following research questions:

**RQ1** How did the online media *Bild* and *FOCUS online* cover the incident compared to the affected company during the period of the March 24-30, 2015?

**RQ2** How did *Bild* cover the event compared to *FOCUS online*?

The study will investigate which communication tools, original sources and tones *FOCUS online*, *Bild*, *Germanwings* and *Lufthansa* utilized during the coverage of the crisis within
the first week of the airplane crash. Furthermore, the different concepts such as the framing processes will be identified in order to answer the overarching question: was there frame alignment from the beginning of the news coverage? Moreover, the coverage of Bild and FOCUS online will be compared in order to identify if the difference or similarity in framing an unsuspected event is connected to the type of medium. Bild is a tabloid and sensational newspaper, while FOCUS online is a more informative newspaper. Identifying the news reports from two different types of papers is substantial to the analysis in order to determine the difference in framing an unsuspected event.
3. Previous research

The following builds the groundwork for this study, Shedding more light on framing a crisis, and crisis communication. The literature’s focus lacks of the connection between online media and online crisis communication of the affected corporation. Furthermore, several research projects have been conducted on frame alignment over time in organizational crises. Limited empirical research was found regarding the framing of sudden and extraordinary events by media and companies. This study will fill this gap by identifying if there is a framing alignment when a crisis occurs without any warning signs.

The internet and crisis communication

The development of the internet changed the interaction between the public, governments and organizations. This has required more research to be undertaken in this field. Perry, Taylor and Doerfel (2003) claim that the internet is a useful tool for crisis management. On one hand, it gives the corporation the opportunity to react fast while also gathering feedback from the public. On the other hand, the World Wide Web is an immense source of different information which the organization can easily access. Their findings are beneficial for crisis managers to see the importance of embracing the power of the internet. Perry, Taylor and Doerfel (2003) analyze the online crisis communication of different companies by going through news web pages. They find that more and more companies apply online crisis communication by relying on “traditional” tactics of crisis communication. The authors emphasize the importance for new crisis communication tactics where the organization engages more with the public in proactive discussions before, during and after a crisis. The internet provides companies with the opportunity to shift from a one-way to a two-way interaction. Taylor and Perry (2005) attempt to investigate if companies use the Internet in crisis communication, and if so, how they use it. After conducting a quantitative content analysis, they discover that half of the 92 companies surveyed implement the internet in their crisis communication. However, they conclude that if companies does not address the crisis on their homepage, the public might perceive it as a “no comment” statement. Taylor and Perry (2005) stress that their findings reveal how companies need to be present online in times of crises in order to maintain their reputation.

Coombs (2015), in his paper “The value of communication during a crisis: Insights from strategic communication research” points to the existence of two crisis communication strategies. The first strategy is based on managing the information, such as Perry, Taylor and Doerfel (2003) define within their internet-based crisis communication research; the other strategy is the managing of meaning. Coombs (2011) supports the notion that it is sometimes better not to communicate at all if both strategies are not well prepared beforehand. In order
to communicate accurately to the stakeholders, it is important for the company to focus on online and offline media.

Romenti, Murtarelli and Valentini (2014) stress that the online world can be helpful in times of crisis. According to their findings, companies use far too many conservative dialogue strategies during early stages of their crisis. Nevertheless, they should use the online conversations offered by social media, the authors argue. Their research solely focuses on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube and does not offer suggestions to ameliorate their online presence on their webpages, as Kent, Taylor and White (2003) suggest. According to Kent, Taylor and White (2003), the internet and the World Wide Web are emerging public relation tools, but too little evidence exists about the extent to which those new technologies help build relationships with the public. The authors examine the connection between the website design and the company’s understanding of audience’s needs by conducting a comparative study. Their findings suggest that design features are crucial for the stakeholders, and the more dialogically interactive the website is designed, the more positive interactions the company has with its stakeholders. Kent and Taylor (2003) identify that a dialogic communication strategy in the online world helps to build bonds with the audience. Coombs (1998) supports this theory by arguing that the internet has the potential to alter an organization’s stakeholder network and that this power should not be underestimated. Coombs (1998) stresses that the most useful tool in order to get in touch with its target audience is to apply the medium they use.

**Online media, social media and crisis**

Previous research has tackled traditional media’s successful into the online world. However, there is little research on crisis communication of organizations. Schifferes and Coulter's (2012) carry out content analysis to determine how news sites cover crises. The authors focus on the role of media in the critical phase of the financial crisis by analyzing the BBC news website. Their research supports their hypothesis that the public’s interaction with the media decreased and that they were merely relying on trusted sources. Schifferes and Coulter (2012) focus on one particular online news media. Other media sources, such as different online news media or social media were not taken into account. Their analysis does not focus on how the crisis communication of the company might have affected the public’s opinion. Howell and Miller (2006), however, suggest that within the crisis life-cycle theory model of Fink (1985), mass media coverage can be predicted and managed by the company. They imply that mass media coverage is different at each stage and that the organization should develop different messages for each of the stages. Howell and Miller (2006) base their assumption on Pan and Kosicki’s statement that the way the mass media frame the events
can have an impact on the coverage of an organization. The authors ascertain that the media is an important feature for the crisis life cycle.

Van der Meer and Verhoeven (2013) show that social media plays a crucial role during the initial phase of a crisis. The authors analyze the framing of organizational crisis by the public and the news media by applying content analysis of online media texts and tweets. The study presents new insights into the public’s manifestations on social media during corporate crises, and online media framing as being a tool to prevent crisis escalation. However, the study was conducted on one Dutch company, which cannot be representative. Additionally, it would have been interesting to see if discrepancies exist between the crisis communication strategy of the organization and the online news media coverage. Sung and Hwang (2014) conduct a similar study in order to explore the interrelation between different types of media. Like Van der Meer and Verheeven’s (2013), the authors analyze and compare online news articles and tweets by applying content analysis. They find out that a company is not regarded as an “appropriate source of information in a corporate crisis situation” (Sung & Hwang, 2014) and that Twitter was the most used channel for crisis-related report. The research uses a current crisis in order to identify the correlation between those different mediums.

Other studies were focus on discovering whether social media has more power on framing a crisis than traditional or online news media. For instance, Cho and Park (2013) investigate government’s Social Media usage during Japan’s 2011 earthquake and its role in communication during a crisis. The researchers use content analysis to analyze tweets from the Japanese government’s Twitter account in order to see gaps in their online crisis communication. They discover that the government is not active on this social network. This study clearly shows that social media is still not sufficiently used in crisis communication, which can be unfavorable nowadays especially because the public mostly responds through those channels. However, the authors did not include traditional or online media in their analysis, which could have shown the interrelation of all the channels used for crisis communication.

Besides, Twitter is a commonly used tool for short and instant messages on the World Wide Web, which makes it important for crisis communicators and researchers. This explains why previous research is mostly based on Twitter. Thus, Onorati and Diaz (2015) focus on the “semantic visualization of Twitter usage in emergency and crisis situations”. Their aim is to find a way to detect the most important information on Twitter in case of emergencies or crisis using a semantic filter to accelerate the process of identifying the most relevant tweets. The results are relevant for those who need to find quick and pertinent information on Twitter, but the study has little to say on the link between social media, online media and corporate crisis situations.
The public seeks to gather insider information from social media and use traditional media for educational purposes, claim Liu and Jin (2012) in their study about “How Audiences seek out crisis information”. The researchers use interviews and an online experiment and conclude that organizations should use both mediums for their crisis communication. The study analyses both traditional and new media and shows the need to include them in theory and practice. Unfortunately, the authors do not show the consequences if those mediums do not work together.

Utz, Schultz and Glocka (2013) discover that the crisis type has fewer effects on the public if it is discussed on social media than in traditional media. People gain their information from the newspapers and complain via social media. As Austin, Fisher Liu, & Jin (2012) mention, the public “consider traditional media more credible and trustworthy” (Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013). The authors find out that people strongly express their discontent on social networks, which in return influences the reputation of the organization. Furthermore, Utz, Schultz, & Glocka discover that there is a need for more complex models of crisis communication. Other researchers, such as Roshan, Warren and Carr (2016), support the same position and call for more research into existing crisis communication models in accordance with the online world. Their aim is to identify how organizations use social media to interact with stakeholders during crises by applying a qualitative content analysis. They find that many organizations did not take advantage of the two-way interaction that social networks offer. Furthermore, they suggest a rethinking of the SCCT in compliance with social media. According to Roshan, Warren and Carr (2016, Coomb’s SCCT model does not offer the full potential for new technologies. Kent (2008) supports the assumption that the research on communication models and, furthermore, online communication tools is still quite limited. He conducts an analysis of organizational blogs dealing with crises and discovers that crisis managers do not take advantage of all the possibilities these online tools offer. Thus, the study tries to fill this gap by analyzing the online crisis communication of a company.

Moreover, Etter and Vetergaard (2015) study the “frame-effects between social media and news media”. Unlike their colleagues, they do not focus on Twitter, but rather on Facebook. Their aim is to identify if the public on Facebook contributes to a shift in the media discourse. Using qualitative analysis, they stress that Facebook does influence media framing, but only to a limited extent. The results clearly show that the news media remain the most powerful medium when compared to social networks.

**Difference in framing a crisis**

Nijkrake, Gosselt and Gutteling (2015) carry out a quantitative research and content analysis in order to compare the crisis communication of an organization to its coverage in the media, by focusing on tones and frames. They use Coombs’ theory of crisis communication to analyze the difference in framing and how it might affect perceptions of issues. They show
that the media and the organization frame within the human interest and that the media constantly reframe the news according to the organization’s’ crisis response. Wertz and Kim (2010) conduct a comparative study on framing crisis messages by different print media. They use a content analysis to quantify the messages of Korean and US media while applying Coombs’ seven categories of crisis response strategies. Their analysis is based on Entman’s definition of framing and Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimensions. The researcher’s purpose is to carry out a cultural analysis of crisis messages, by identifying two different food crises, the E.coli spinach crisis in the United States and the dumpling crisis in South Korea. Their findings show that the frames used by the media are directly linked to the messages of the organization. They conclude that organizations should be aware of globalization and that their messages should be adapted culturally for every target country. Furthermore, the authors declare that such events are predictable and that the companies had crisis communication plans beforehand. Van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes and Vliegenthart (2013) analyze four Dutch crises that received more media attention. The crises occurred because of a variety of reasons, such as exploding fireworks killing 27 people, or the bankruptcy of a bank that led to the firing of 1400 employees. Compared to the Wertz and Kim’s (2010) study cited above, the companies in the case of the study conducted by Van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes and Vliegenthart had well elaborated crisis communication plans. Van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes and Vliegenthart (2013) use an automated semantic-network analysis in order to identify if frame alignment emanates from the domains PR, news media and the public over time. Their findings show that the three actors make different sense of the event situation at the beginning of the crisis coverage, but that they align over time. However, their research only includes crises occurring with warning signs and to which the companies have an elaborated a detailed crisis communication plan beforehand. Bowen and Zheng (2014) examine through a content analysis how the media frame Toyota’s crises and if the media coverage differed from the company’s press releases. Their research bases its theoretical framework on media frame theory, situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) and ethics of crisis response. They find that the media had a different approach covering the crises than the company itself. Furthermore, the researchers assume that the media had an unfavorable tone towards the company because they were slower in reacting properly to the crisis.

The case of the Germanwings airplane crash, which is subject to this paper, occurred without any warning signs, which makes it an extraordinary event. The findings could fill several gaps in the field of frame alignment research.

The previous research builds an important foundation for the thesis since it clarifies concepts of the power of the internet on crisis communication, the online media’s coverage of crises
and frame alignment over time. However, the above-mentioned researchers were mostly focusing on the traditional crisis communication in the online world but did not offer an analysis of online crisis communication in relation to the news webpages. Additionally, they were mostly focusing on crises that were not an absolute surprise for the company and the media. Bild, FOCUS online and Germanwings could not prepare their discourse beforehand and shape their opinion regarding this case. This is one reason why the Germanwings airplane crash is a relevant case that needs to be investigated.
4. Theoretical frame and concepts

Nowadays, as a result of globalization, we live in an interconnected world where “increasingly everything interacts with everything else” (Mitroff, 2006, p.xi). The “new technologies”, such as the World Wide Web, allow us to surpass geographical and time limitations. In this complex and interdependent system, all crises become global, and the risk that they might escalate is higher than before. Mitroff (2006) suggests that it comes from the fact that the information flows freely according to its own “logic” and pace. This uncontrollable flow of information makes it more challenging for companies to adjust their communication strategy, especially when it comes to unexpected events. According to Coombs (2007), a crisis is a precipitous event that threatens to disorder an organization’s operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat. The BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, the sinking of the cruise ship Costa Concordia that caused the loss of several lives in 2012, and the Germanwings plane crash in 2015 that caused 150 deaths are examples of unexpected events having a global impact. These crises dominated the international media for a long period of time. It is crucial for organizations to act fast and be transparent from the beginning of the reporting in order to limit their reputational damage.

This shift into the online world has drastically changed the media as well; the competition is much more intense than before. This is the cause of the drastic rise of online magazines and the desire not “to pay a subscription charge for content. It just wasn’t something one did online.” (Bucy, 2004, p.27) In order for online newspapers, magazines and journals to survive in the online world, they need to be different, to offer something special compared to the others. This made the need for fast information even higher. First come, first served. The content is much more dynamic, rapid and global in an online environment, explains Bucy (2005). Due this digitization, the media makes content available 24 hours a day so to continuously update their international audience. Considering the fact that the media is free and easy to access for anyone with access to the internet, people today consume more media than before, shows the “15th Annual Communication Industry Forecast” (Bucy, 2005, p.69). This thesis is going to analyze the media’s representation of two online news media, FOCUS online and Bild, on the Germanwings airplane crash in March 2015, and compare it to the crisis communication of Lufthansa and its subdivision, Germanwings.

In order to analyze if the difference in covering or framing endures during sudden crises, the study is going to use the media framing theory by Entman (1993 and 2003) and the crisis communication theory of Coombs (2011). Furthermore, media and crisis communication logic is explained in the following to grasp the fundamental differences between the two parties. In order to identify if there is a frame-alignment between Bild, FOCUS online and Germanwings it is crucial to understand how researchers make sense of their actions.
Identifying their logic can give insights if Bild and FOCUS online covered the crisis based on their logic or if they adapted their communication towards Germanwings crisis coverage.

**Framing theory**

Several definitions of framing exist and researchers such as Entman, Giltin, and McCombs have tried to clarify this concept through different approaches. Their theories are described in this section in an attempt to build the theoretical framework of this study.

Entman (1993) defines the action of framing as a selection of some aspects of a perceived reality that are highlighted in a text in order to advocate a particular issue. According to his definition, framing refers to the phenomenon that someone, a journalist, media institution or other, shares his side or interpretation of a story and thus only focuses on one particular aspect. This results in a one hand driven narrative that potentially leaves out other important aspects of the represented event. However, Entman published a new definition of framing in 2003 in which he claims that the culture in which the news producer is embedded plays a remarkable role when it comes to text production. “They use words and images highly salient in the culture, which is to say noticeable, understandable, memorable, and emotionally charged.” (p. 417) Entman (2003) suggests that the frames have at least four locations in the communication process. The first location is the communicator, which makes conscious or unconscious decisions of what he wants to say. His evaluations are guided by previous frames, defines Entman (2003). The second location is the text, which contains frames disclosed by the presence or absence of certain words, images or sources of information. Then there is the way the receiver decodes the presented text and keywords. During this process, he sets the frame or interprets the frame within his own culture. The culture, pursuant to Entman (2003), is the overarching frame that shapes the frames to follow.

McCombs claims that the concept of framing focusses “on how the objects of attention in messages – issues, political figures, or other topics – are presented.” (2014, p.59). Moreover, it highlights to what extent an object’s detailed representation has an “influence on our thoughts and feelings about them” (McCombs, 2014, p.59). Furthermore, he affirms that “many times, the media influence our attitudes and opinions and even our behavior” (McCombs, 2014, p.59). Gitlin (1992) supports this assumption and states the media help shape public consciousness, but that does not imply to which extent the receiver is influenced by the presented frame (p.141). The following example shows that the media not only creates a picture in our head but that they can influence our behavior. This can be seen in a survey conducted by Alexander Bloj for McCombs “communication theory course” where he finds that the average ticket sale dramatically decreased for an airplane company after an incident occurred where more than ten people died. According to McCombs (2014, p. 105) “news
about plane crashes and skyjacking offers another example of a link between agenda-setting effects and risk avoidance behavior.” This means that the perception of risk is higher and that the people seek to avoid using the same airline, even though it is not sustained that this incident could happen again. This example shows that the coverage of such an incident clearly raises the feeling of fear among the public.

Using the media framing theory can be helpful to identify the approach of the online media Bild and FOCUS online on the Germanwings crisis in March 2015. Tankard (2001) claims that framing defines an event or a specific issue and sets the tone of the debate at the same time. Media framing should not be confused with bias, it’s more than just pro or contra, and it also has an emotional and cognitive dimension. De Vreese (2005) affirms that framing is hard to define since it is exceedingly subtle while it executes its power. The audience does not necessarily notice the shift in discourse. Media framing can be helpful in identifying media hegemony, which occurs when one frame is so dominant that people accept it without even noticing its existence. De Vreese (2005, p. 51) points out that framing is an “influential way that the media may shape public opinion [...] in particular ways.” Framing is not dictum what to think of the situation, but it directs the focus in one particular direction, which makes sure that the audience only sees this aspect and not compare it to another (or “unable to compare it with/to another). Furthermore, the media have unconsciously an impact on the public, especially once they are exposed to the same coverage over a longer period of time. The public often rejects visible frames proposed by the media. However, salient frames offered by the media condition and limit public discussion. When it comes to certain subjects, the media decide whom they put forward, and thus those presented get more attention from the public. (Gitlin, 1992). The media oversimplify reality in order for the public to better understand different and difficult concepts related to events. They create simple packages for the audience to understand and that simplified news makes sure that other information is not taken into consideration, mentions Gitlin (1992). Tankard (2001) gives the example of a painting that is surrounded by a frame. The frame lets the viewer focus on one thing and cuts out the rest of it. Furthermore, the material, or in the case of a media frame referred to as tone, inserts the audience in a particular environment. Tankard (2001) also suggests different framing mechanisms, such as headlines, photos, source selection, quote selection and logos that are central features for analyzing news frames. Understanding the different types of frames is necessary in order to identify when and why actors apply them, declares De Vreese (2005). He considers framing as a process that involves frame building and frame setting. Frame building defines how frames emerge; it is the relationship between journalists and society. Frame setting refers to the interaction between the audience and the frames created by the media. According to De Vreese’s (2005) definition of frame setting, framing influences the learning process of individuals. However, he alleges that framing is always part of
presenting an issue. Tewskbury and Scheufele (2008) argue that media framing can have an influence on public’s views, belief and how they interpret portrayed issues and events.

**Media logic theory**

Media logic is a form of communication, and it defines how media essentially transmits and distributes information through one particular medium. One of the assumptions of this theory is that events or objects are represented with different symbols that follow their own particular grammatical rules. This interpretation is taken for granted by its audience and is reused in everyday life as a guideline for social interaction and can have an impact on the respective cultures (Altheide, 2014). However, profit and economic benefits are more important than to “help audiences understand their world,” argues Altheide (2014, p.19). He goes even further in claiming that the media’s logic is quite similar to the advertising sector. According to Altheide (2014, p.57), “The mass media and popular culture entertain audiences by dramatizing and presenting events and issues according to predictable narratives that are scripted with emotionally resonant stereotypes and caricatures.” This displays that the media’s role is mostly to entertain the public and not only to inform its audience as it shifts between local and global communities. Moreover, Pavlik (1999) mentions that journalists’ work and news content gets highly influenced by the rise of new technology. He argues that online news is repackaged content as they can combine video, audio, text and a platform for feedback at the same time. This 360-degree experience is two-fold; on the one hand, it gives more sense to the content and makes it easier for the audience to understand different events or objects that are being reported. On the other hand, it may heighten problems of poor online news judgement as Pavlik (1999) clarifies. This could be the cause of several news sources seeing themselves as content providers and therefore do not rely on traditional journalistic standards. Academic research has revealed that this demand for instant information increases considerably when unexpected events occur and that the public predominantly uses the internet as their news source (Pavlik, 1999). In order for the online media to attract the audience, they need to have a distinct approach to the event; otherwise, they will only be one of the many online and open news platforms. This takes us back to Altheides’ (2014) media logic theory where he claims that the media’s narrative is similar to the advertisement storyline. It is more about entertaining and telling a story than to solely inform the public. The media’s focus is on dramaturgy and transmitting a specific emotion, especially when it comes to promoting fear (Altheide, 2014). This phenomenon can primarily be observed in times of crises, where the need for instant information is exceedingly important for the public (Allan, 2006). Allan (2006) identifies the media’s coverage on Princess Diana’s death in 1997 and observes that the online news went worldwide even before her death was confirmed by officials. One of the most common tools used by the online news was the timelines, which were constantly updated in order to directly inform the world about
this tragedy. The online news media *Bild* and *FOCUS online* which are subject to this study used this type of narrative during the crisis reporting of the *Germanwings* airplane crash in March 2015.

**Crisis communication theory**

Crisis communication logic strongly differs from media logic. As previously mentioned, a “crisis is a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization’s operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat.” (Coombs, 2007, p.164). He suggests that crises vary along three dimensions: the perceived importance, the immediacy and the uncertainty. Coombs (2011) raises the question of how a problem can be corrected if it is not understood. Moreover, if the source of the problem is not clear, as was the case for the *Germanwings* plane crash, then it will be held by the media and the public for a longer period of time. Furthermore, the chance that rumors will dominate the crisis discourse is quite high (Coombs, 2011). Uncertainty is a dangerous phase for the company since the public will seek alternative sources of information. As previously mentioned, the public’s need for information during crises is higher than for regular news (Allan, 2006). In this case, their attention will probably be drawn towards the media that most likely publishes information that is either unconfirmed or merely close to reality. Additionally, if the involved company previously endorsed such an event and/or is perceived as irresponsible, the public skepticism is much higher than usual. In this case, the risk that the media uses an unfavorable narrative is greater too. Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2011) argue that in case the organization does not communicate the necessary information to the public, “the media speculate on questions concerning the crisis as information is not readily available” (2011, p.38). In order to be perceived as trustworthy, the company “must communicate early and often following a crisis regardless of whether they have critical information” (Ullmer, Sellnow and Seeger, 2011, p.39). Mitroff (2006, p.25) supports this assertion:“From the earliest stages of a crisis, there is tremendous uncertainty as to its exact nature, and even its exact type.” This uncertainty leads to the company not knowing if the crisis happened because of human or technical failure. How can they communicate correctly if the source of the problem is unknown? This is only one of the questions that will guide the study during its data collection process. Another given example of Mitroff (2006) is the concept of complete transparency, in which he explains that the media often use much easier concepts to communicate to the public than the corporations do. Whereas the company, in their attempt of being as clear as possible, back up their arguments with complicated facts to which the public often cannot relate to.
Different Crisis communication models
This study will investigate inter alia the crisis communication of the Germanwings and Lufthansa company. Different crisis communication models persist as the three-stage approach of Coombs (2011) testifies. Coombs describes different stages of crisis communication, such as the Pre-crisis, Crisis Event and Post-crisis. Another crisis communication model is the crisis life cycle of Fink (1986). It is central to the analysis of this study since it is more detailed than Coombs (2011) approach and clarifies notions of crisis communication cycles.

Crisis life cycle of Fink (1986)
The crisis life cycle of Fink (1986) is a widely used model with a business-oriented focus. He defines a crisis as a “turning point” where the situation is either to recover or intensify in severity. According to Fink (1986), if an event has reached the crisis level, usually four stages occur.

The prodromal crisis stage
When signs of serious risks are appearing but not addressed. Some of the signs are more visible and some others occur more hidden. It is up to the company to find and define them and to avoid their expansion in order to preserve their reputation.

The acute crisis stage
Fink (1986) names it the point of no return. If the company did not address properly or did not address the signs presented in stage one, damage would have already occurred, and it is all about how to fix or how to decrease the risk of reputational damage. The question is now; can the company limit the damage or is it getting even worse? Fink (1986) claims that scholars like Coombs, or crisis managers assume the acute stage endures the entire crisis. But in the case of the Germanwings incident, the topic of this study, the airplane crash is only the beginning. The acute phase is the shortest out of the four stages, according to Fink (1986). The airplane crash itself does not endure for a long period of time but it is the investigations conducted further on that take more time, and they decide about the faith of the crisis.

The chronic crisis stage
As previously mentioned for the acute stage, investigations into the cause of a crisis can take a long time until they are closed. This is why the chronic stage is the longest since during this phase the company has time to adapt and evaluate their crisis communication according to the findings. Fink (1986) mentions that the company learns internally from the crisis during
this stage and that they can revise about positive and negative aspects of their crisis communication during the previous stages, and later on, learn from their experiences.

**The crisis resolution stage**
In this phase, the crisis manager thrives to obtain the resolution phase as fast as possible. All the problems and mistakes faced during the crisis communication prolongs the previous stages. Some of the organizations never reach this stage, due to the severity of the crisis. The present study analyzes the first 24 hours after the *Germanwings* airplane crash occurred, which situates it into the acute stage and the chronic stage crisis stage according to Fink’s (1986) crisis life cycle model.

**The three-stage approach of Coombs (2011)**
Firstly, it is important to understand the concept of crisis management in order to conduct a profound analysis. Coombs (2011) suggests a three-stage approach built upon the Precrisis, Crisis Event, and the Postcrisis. Each of these stages has sub-stages of which crisis managers to successfully perform during unsuspected events should use one, endorses Coombs (2011).

**Precrisis**
During this stage of the crisis, the members organization members should do everything possible to prevent crises, but also prepare when a crisis would occur. Signal detection, prevention and crisis preparation are the three sub-stages involved, according to Coombs (2011). The signal detection refers to the assumption that every crisis has its warning signs that need to be addressed in order to prevent a crisis, which applies to the second sub stage. The crisis preparation sub-stage is when the crisis communication strategy should be developed and where all the involved parties are selected.

**Crisis Event**
The crisis manager has to recognize that a crisis occurred, crisis recognition, which is the first of the two sub-stages. The second sub-stage is called crisis containment and defines the stage when the crisis manager needs to take appropriate actions in order to avoid an aggravation. Communicating to stakeholders should be one of their main priorities. Coombs (2011) points out that this stage endures until the crisis is resolved.

**Postcrisis**
Throughout the time of this stage, the company needs to decide what is next (Coombs, 2011). They can learn from their mistakes and get better prepared in case of a succeeding crisis.
Additionally, this stage requires the company to leave a positive outcome for the stakeholders and to monitor if the crisis is really over.
5. Method

This chapter presents the method of collecting data, analysis of the chosen material via relevant qualitative tools.

The study is uses qualitative analysis since it focuses on how the media and the company represented the airplane crash during the selected timeframe. Berger (2014) mentions that the qualitative method is not as narrow as quantitative analysis and allows more room for interpretation. In order to avoid reading too much into the text (Berger, 2016), it is crucial for the researcher to define and clarify the coding sheet beforehand.

There is not such a thing as the best research method for media effect analysis; it is a matter of which one is the most applicable for answering the research questions. The qualitative method is the preferred option in this case in order to identify if the dissimilarity in framing a crisis endures in times of surprising events. Frames can be identified by detecting the structure of the text and the content itself, not by counting the amount of articles written on the subject.

This study is going to investigate if *FOCUS online* and *Bild* framed the event differently than *Germanwings* by focusing on the content of the media articles and the press conferences during the time range of one week. Not all of the media articles were included in the analysis, as they did not fulfill all of the requirements needed in order to conduct a thorough analysis. The selected articles that are subject to this paper count at least one page and focus on the crash. Furthermore, repetitive articles that merely summarise another article from the same medium were not included in the analysis. The press releases of *Germanwings* are not in the focus of the analysis as they mostly summarise their press conferences. Even thought one could argumentate that the items are not comparable due to their difference in nature, they are relevant as this study focuses on the question if there was a framing alignment. Furthermore, this thesis does not conduct a textual analysis were it is crucial to analyse different texts.

Qualitative analysis

Compared to quantitative analyses, qualitative research methods do not rely on measurements but on interpretations (Gillespie and Toynbee, 2006). When applying a textual analysis, the researcher can make guesses of the most likely interpretations and make assumptions of how others interpret reality (McKee, 2003). Bryman (2012) suggests reducing the amount of data in order to make sense of it, which is why it is crucial to identify themes through pre-defined codes (Bryman, 2012). Codes and labels structure the issue and clarify the understanding. According to Fairclough (2003), texts have three major types of
meaning: action, representation and identification. These types can even be found in smaller parts of texts, which is why this research bases its qualitative analysis on Fairclough’s definition. While this paper does not apply Critical Discourse Analysis, it is partly informed by the CDA approach pioneered by Fairclough. This is due to the fact that limited models of text analysis exists in qualitative analysis. CDA researchers, however, suggest interesting tools that are more elaborated for the analysis of the first layer of texts. As mentioned earlier, in order to successfully use qualitative analysis, it is important that the coding sheet is clearly pre-defined. Considering the fact that one of the research questions compares two different item types, it is crucial to focus on the difference representation of the content within the same category. Therefore, the study to analyses the collected data within three categories: action, representation and identification. Action defines the act within its social relation, as informing or advising. Representation refers to what is represented in the text and identification outlines a statement or judgment. The analysis concentrates on a timeframe of one week, therefore it won’t merely concentrate on the footage from one day to another but on the different event types, such as the day of the crash, the time of the investigation with its different peaks and the finding of the cause.

Material of the research
The material of the research consists of articles retrieved from two online German newspapers and press releases from the affected company. The media agencies and the affected company are listed below in order to get a better understanding of the context of the articles.

FOCUS online
This online newsmagazine belongs to the “Burda” publishing house, which is one of the largest publishing houses and media groups in Germany. The print version, titled “FOCUS”, is published once a week and is the 3rd largest newsmagazine in Germany. “FOCUS” covers different topics, such as politics, family, health, finance and career. “FOCUS” defines their target audience as young and career oriented citizens. The online version of this newsmagazine became accessible to a broader audience in 1996 when it was published online. FOCUS online published information about the tragic event directly after the airplane was stated missing and established immediately a timeline. This timeline was constantly updated and filled with new information and insights related to the crash. They published several articles related to the Germanwings case during the timeframe that is under investigation in the study. Since FOCUS online is a German newspaper, the research items will be categorized and translated into English.
**Bild**

*Bild* is the largest German tabloid and most sold newspaper in Germany. It belongs to the media agency “Axel-Springer-Verlag” and is known as a sensational newspaper. They publish international and regional news, sports, celebrities and politicians. *Bild* is also known to show scandals prominently on their cover page. This paper is relevant for this study as it is Germany’s largest news and entertainment platform and thus, less informative as the “FOCUS” online newsmagazine. They have a daily print distribution and a monthly traffic of 297 million visitors on their online version “Bild.de” (Bild.de, retrieved 15th of May 2017). *Bild* introduced a timeline right after the airplane got lost, such as *FOCUS online*. They published a large amount of articles during the week that is under investigation of this study.

**Germanwings and Lufthansa**

*Germanwings* and *Lufthansa* barely posted information during the first 24 hours after the crash occurred. The *Germanwings* homepage became inaccessible the day of the crash, due to the amount of visitors. This is probably the reason why the companies mainly used their social media networks to communicate to the public. However, *Germanwings* did not only post tweets on their Twitter account but they also held a press conference and released press statements. However, the tweets are still subject, but not central to the analysis. The needed information was gathered through the *Lufthansa* webpage (Lufthansa, n.d.), their Twitter account (Lufthansa, 2016), *Germanwings* webpage (Euro wings, n.d.) and their Twitter account (Euro wings, 2016). *Germanwings* officially changed their brand name into Euro wings in January 2016, which is why the name of the source are different than the company mentioned within the study. However, since the crash occurred under the name of *Germanwings*, this study is maintaining the brand name they had during that time. The press conferences were from the YouTube channel of a German news television, called “Phoenix”.

**Samples of the investigation**

Flick (2007) stresses that qualitative research is based on openness towards who and what is being studied. Moreover, Flick (2007) asserts that qualitative research is flexible and that the items can be interpreted in different ways, depending on how the researchers presents his or her arguments. As previously mentioned, *Germanwings*'s website shut down the day of the crash, which is why they primarily used social media. However, they held a press conference the same day and published press releases on their parent company “Lufthansa”. Eighteen press releases and 6 press conferences were retrieved from the 24th of March 2015 until the
30th March 2015. They published several posts in addition to those releases which are not included in the analysis due to the fact that they repeated or summarized the press releases and conferences. The medium Bild published 127 articles and FOCUS online published 102 articles during this time period, mentioning the Germanwings plane crash and the investigation. After sorting out the articles that are not relevant for the analysis, such as repetitions or articles that do not include information related to one of the research questions, we have 35 items for Bild and 30 for FOCUS online.

**Model of the analysis**

Carvalho (2008) indicates that textual analysis should be examined within different dimensions in order to identify the hidden meanings and ideologies in text. As mentioned earlier, this study does not apply critical discourse analysis. However, some elements of CDA are subject to the study such as different dimensions related to representations in the text. As this study focuses on the difference in framing, it is important to identify the representation of certain actors within FOCUS online, Bild and Germanwings. The dimensions that are going to be analyzed within the first stage are the source of information, the actors present in the text, the language or grammar use and discursive strategies (Carvalho, 2008, p.167).

**Source of information**

Detecting the source of information is crucial to this study since this can reveal if the media were referring to the coverage of the company or if the company did pick up information from the media. This category might be tightly connected to the “actors” category, however, in this section the focus lies on direct citations within the articles. Whereas the “actors” category focusses on the social actors present in the content. This is especially relevant before and after the press conferences held by Germanwings and Lufthansa. Questions such as “Did Bild or FOCUS online report about the press conference?” and also “How did they report about the press conference?”. Moreover, did the media publish certain information that were central to the press conference already before the company did mention them?

**Actors**

Which social actors were present in the news coverage? Were they put forward or in the background? Identifying the importance of different actors for Bild, FOCUS online and Germanwings can display similarities and discrepancies, and disclose if their difference in framing remains when sudden events occur. In order to analyze the representation of social actors, these study investigates which social actors were mentioned during the coverage of the
different events during that period. The co-pilot, the pilot, passengers or relatives are examples for actors mentioned in the text.

Moreover, this study will analyze if FOCUS online, Bild or Germanwings represented social actor as active, someone that does something, or if he is passivated, the one affected by the action (Carvalho, 2008). "He [the co-pilot] killed everyone in the airplane" is an example taken from one of Bild articles of the crisis coverage which represents the co-pilot as an active actor. "The passengers were killed" is an example taken from FOCUS online that is representative for a passivated actor [the passengers].

Besides, Fairclough (2003) argues that four different aspects can be valuable while analyzing the role of social actors. First, there is the presence, when the researcher identifies if the elements of the event are present or absent, and prominent or in the background. Which actors were put forward during the first week of the coverage of the airplane crash by FOCUS online, Bild and Germanwings? Moreover, aspects that were abstracted in order to see if the media or the company generalized the event are going to be investigated. Another aspect that can help to the answer the research questions is addition, which refers to information that was added in the representation of the event, such as explanations or evaluations.

Language, grammar and rhetoric

After studying the first layer of the texts, first interpretations can be drawn upon the framing process of the medium or company. Additionally, in order to identify distinctive choices made by FOCUS online and Germanwings, the study focuses on word connotations. Machin and Mayr (2012, p.32) define word connotations as “certain choices that have been made by the author for their own motivated reason”.

Since the aim of this study is to discover how FOCUS online, Bild and Germanwings covered the crisis, it is crucial to examine the rhetoric. Furthermore, identifying the tone of coverage might lead to discern differences and similarities in framing the incident. Another strategy relevant how to discern the media and company`s tone while covering the event is by classifying the different statements (Fairclough, 2003). The realis statement is a statement of facts; it refers to an assertion of something that has been done. Such a declaration can be identified within the text when the subject precedes the verb (Fairclough, 2003, p.115). "The co-pilot did it on purpose" or "The airplane crashed" are examples for realis statements. The irrealis statement invokes a prediction and hypothetical statement, while the evaluation might be understood as an exclamation. "He presumably did it on purpose" or "we have to assume that everyone died".
**Fink’s crisis life cycle**

The first part of the analysis focusses on the 24th and 25th of March 2015 which is the acute crisis stage, according to Fink’s (1986) definition of the crisis life cycle. In this stage, the damage has already occurred, which is the plane crash and the death of 144 people. The second part of the analysis focusses on the news report from the 26th until the 30th of March 2015, in which the investigations have already started. During that time period they find the voice recorder and furthermore, and discover the cause of the incident. According to Fink’s (1986) crisis life cycle definition, the dates from the 26th until the 30th of March 2015 fall into the chronic crisis stage. It is the stage of the investigation of the cause and the first steps towards a resolution of the crisis. Fink emphasizes that this stage is usually the longest of them all.

**Validity**

The validity of the chosen method can be questioned such as the ability to obtain relevant answers for the aim and research questions anticipated in this study. The different natures of the items might be considered as incomparable, since this study analyses periodic updates of the online medium with the press conference of the involved company, such as a few updates from Germanwings and Lufthansa. However, the focus of this study lays on the question if there is a frame alignment from the beginning of the crisis or if the difference in logic remains from the start. In order to answer to this question we have to look at the company’s discourse and the media’s discourse. While looking at the tones applied we can identify if the medium changed their discourse and by analyzing the tones of the company we can analyze if they applied the same frames as the medium and vice versa. Another factor that can be considered as problematic is the fact that the collected items are originally in German and later on translated into English. This might affected the analysis of the language, therefore the researcher tried to transcribe the texts in English without losing its context.

Unfortunately, interpretation problems of the presented results cannot be excluded. Berger (2014) states the presented results can be interpreted in different ways and might lead to misconceptions. Even though the researcher analyses the collected items applying the pre-defined codes and categories, objectivity cannot be reached. The researcher’s beliefs and ideologies are embedded and always present during the analysis. However, the researcher of this study is aware of this fact and remains transparent when presenting the way he or she conducted the analysis.
6. Analysis

In this section, the articles of *FOCUS online* and *Bild*, as well as the press conferences and press releases of *Germanwings* and *Lufthansa* are analyzed through a qualitative analysis. The analysis is presented in a chronological order and includes short introductions from the author of the thesis in order for the reader to understand the context.

**March 24 2015**

An air tracking website called "Flightradar" published a post on their social media account about an airplane that got lost on the morning of March 24, 2015. The media that are subject to the analysis directly picked this post and mentioned the loss of connection to the airplane on their online platforms. Both media published an article before the company confirmed or even addressed this accident.

The first article that *Bild* published on this matter included several actors such as the crew, the number of passengers, the company itself and passengers at the airport. The medium used 2 realis statements to reinforce that the plane crashed and that there is no room for interpretation left. *Bild* framed the accident in a human-interest perspective when they mention the crying passengers at the airport. This finding highlights Nijkrake, Gosselt and Gutteling (2015) study in which they show that the media were framing with the human interest. *Bild's* article does not mention any direct sources, while *FOCUS online* clearly indicates the source of their information, such as "Flightradar" and one French newspaper. Another difference is the writing style that differentiates from the other medium. *FOCUS online* does not affirm the crash of the airplane but they use quoting verbs, such as "according to" when mentioning the incident. Furthermore, the actors they mentioned are not the amount of passengers but the politicians, prime ministers and journalists that express their condolences. This shows a difference in reporting the event: the sensational newspaper does not directly mention its sources but confirms the crash, while the informative medium does not confirm the crash and mentions its source of information. The company, on the other hand, does not address the crash until they have it confirmed via the French authorities. They published a press release on *Lufthansa's* website and held a joint press conference with *Germanwings* mentioning actors, such as the number of passengers and the crew. The companies use realis statements to assert the crash of the airplane. They also give further details about the flight, regarding the time of departure and express their condolences on several instances during the press conference. *Germanwings* CEO repeats that the company is like a "second family" and that he is deeply shocked by this accident. He expresses his condolences towards the relatives and at the same time stresses that he is
personally damaged by this incident. In this way, he shows that he cares about the incident and that he wants to find the cause of the accident since he is affected by this as well. The first coverage of the media and the company shows that there is a difference in logic between them. Allan (2006) stresses that the public needs instant information in times of crisis and the media fulfill this need as shown above. They did not wait for the confirmation of the company but started investigating on their own. Even though Bild and FOCUS online had different approaches reporting the incident, both still picked up on it. This underlines Altheide’s (2014) argument that the media merely want to entertain the public and that they focus on dramaturgy and specific emotions. Bild for example, does mention people crying and “hugging each other at the airport” to accentuate the gravity of the accident. The delay in confirming the crash by the company is common since they want to get the facts right before communicating to the public, asserts Coombs (2011). When the company confirmed the crash, they provided information regarding the number of passengers, technical facts about the airplane and also stressed their grief to emphasize the urgency of discovering the reason. The company remained silent after their first press release and the press conference, mentioning beforehand that they are focusing on finding the reason for the crash and supporting the relatives in this “dark hour.” However, Allan (2006) mentions that the need for information is exceedingly important for the public in times of crises. As previously mentioned, the media fulfilled this need when mentioning the crash and they continued publishing articles that were either directly or indirectly related to the incident. Bild published several articles that summarized all the previous catastrophes of Germanwings and Lufthansa, which supports Altheide’s (2014) statement that the media focus on dramaturgy. In those articles, they use a realis statement since they focus on previous incidents that happened in the past. FOCUS online does not mention previous catastrophes but focuses on different actors such as witnesses and relatives. This can be seen as dramaturgy since they mention people “crying” or “Nothing will ever be the same again”. They publish one article debating whether it was a terrorist attack or not by comparing the statement of a French newspaper and the statement of politicians. FOCUS online withdraws this idea quickly by mentioning that “there is no evidence of a possible terrorist attack.”

By exposing statements of different sources, Bild and FOCUS online display a certain level of transparency. Mitroff (2006) explains that this phenomenon is typical for the media since they attempt to be as clear as possible when informing the public. Nonetheless, Ullmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2011) stress that the company needs to communicate early and often follow the crisis in order to be perceived as trustworthy. The affected company Germanwings does hold a second short press conference in the evening in which they mention the same actors as during the first press conference in the morning. However, this time they reinforce
the fact that they assume that this accident was a misfortune and openly ask the media not to publish any speculation before they get confirmed. Along these lines, Germanwings tries to limit the risk of reputational damage. As Fink (1986) states, the acute crisis stage is crucial for the company since they have to discern if they can limit the damage or if it’s getting worse. FOCUS online respect the company’s demand for patience by summarizing the press conference by merely using quotes. The subsequent articles they publish are framed within the human-interest angle as they interview witnesses at the airport or cover emotional stories of the victims of the crash. One of the articles is an interview with one of the Spanish host families that had to drive to the airport for one of the girls that forgot her passport. They emphasize the tragedy of the event, saying that “she wasn’t supposed to be on the airplane” and “she could have escaped her destiny.” This emotional narrative is part of the media’s logic (Altheide, 2014). Even though Bild also summarizes the press conference, they still publish several articles speculating over the reasons why this plane crashed. One of the articles is entitled “Three assumptions over the crash,” where they quote several German magazines, addressing numerous theories over the reason of the accident. They use irrealis statements and used words such as “assumingly,” “might have” or “possibly.” Moreover, they published several articles framed within the human-interest aspect in which they describe the pain of the parents who lost their children in the accident. They use a vivid vocabulary to describe the misery of the relatives. One of their sentences runs as follows: “They [the pupils] happily said bye to their Spanish friends were sure to see each other again. Little did they know that they were about to sign their death sentence.” This type of narrative evokes a strong emotion in the reader (Allan, 2006) which influences his attitude and behavior towards this accident (McCombs, 2014). Bild’s objective when publishing those types of articles is to affect the reader with their message. This underlines Altheide’s (2014) argument that the media’s logic is to evoke strong feelings and fear in the reader.

March 25, 2015

On the night of March 25, 2015, the investigation team finds the black box which is being handed over to the public prosecutor.

FOCUS online publishes an informative article that mentions that the public prosecutor’s office has started investigations on suspicion of negligent killing. The medium summarizes the short press conference at the prosecutor’s office, and remains merely informative using realsis statements: “the investigation has started.” Bild publishes an article with this catchy headline: “The secret crash report for the German government”. Using the word “secret” in the headline implies that the medium has information that no one else has, regardless if the information is substantiated or not. They probably choose this title to get more attention for
this article. However, the content of this article is the same as *FOCUS online* about the recovered black box. In the meantime, the company’s website and social media accounts remain silent until their press conference that takes place in the afternoon. *Bild* and *FOCUS online* feed the public with information in several articles. Both media publish articles about the victims, their relatives and the school of the school class that died in the airplane. Their articles are similar since they mention the same actors and use words such as “sad,” “cry” and “speechless.” They mostly quote the actors and do not speculate on the findings of the black box.

*Germanwings’* press conference focusses on the different nationalities of the passengers, the “perfect condition of the airplane” and does not address the finding of the black box. The company clearly has no information on the cause of the accident and does not address any assumptions that could harm them. Coombs (2011) stresses out how crucial this phase is for the company if they do not know the reason but try to make sense of the facts they currently have. Furthermore, they explain their lack of communicating throughout the day, while saying that they were focusing on the relatives and the investigation. After the press conference, *Bild* publishes an article mentioning a flight expert as its source, speculating over the reason of the crash. *Bild* use one irrealis statements, suggesting that “they [the pilot and co-pilot] might have passed out”. They do not mention this press conference at any time in the following articles. *FOCUS online*, on the other hand, publishes a short summary of the press conference without mentioning the black box at any time. They do, however, quote a German newspaper that there was a technical problem right before take-off. In this article, they also cite a spokesperson that confirms this information. Even though they publish this information, they do not speculate on the reason for the crash. This article was merely informative and included reals statements based on quotes to affirm their facts. *FOCUS online* reacting to the press conference does support the findings of Nijkrake, Gosselt and Gutteling (2015) that the media reframed the news according to the organization’s response. While *Bild* does not react to the company’s press conference and continued speculating over the reasons, *FOCUS online* summarized the press conference and got in touch with a spokesperson for the company to back up their arguments.

**March 26, 2015**

In the morning of March 26, 2015, several newspapers all over the world reported about the pilot or co-pilot being alone in the cockpit right before the crash occurred. At this point, the chronic crisis stage of Fink’s (1986) crisis life cycle starts, as this is where the company needs to adapt their crisis communication according to the findings.
Bild quotes an American newspaper that cites a member of the investigation, saying that the pilot was alone in the cockpit before the plane crashed. They comment on this finding and raise the question of “Why” and “who let this happen”? This shows that this discovery was not predictable and displays that they are helpless to this finding. Germanwings held a press conference after several media reported the news. They confirm that the pilot did leave the cockpit right before the engine went into the drastic descent and that he left the co-pilot alone. The CEO, however, stresses that this says nothing about the cause and asks the media on several instances not to publish the name of any of the crew members involved. The company commented on the findings even though they did not confirm them. Coombs (2011) asserts that if the company remains silent, the risk for speculation gets higher. However, Bild criticizes the press conference and writes that the “CEO provides answers with a personal note to the questions. He does not say everything.” In the same article, they use word connotation such as “Amok-pilot” when referring to the co-pilot. This term is a realis statement and negative connotation to one of the actors. The co-pilot that was mentioned passively during the previous days suddenly became an active actor. Bild operates according to its logic while being dramatic and promoting fear (Altheide, 2014). FOCUS online on the other hand, merely summarizes the press conference and remains expository in the narration of the findings. They align their communication towards the company’s discourse, while Bild solely operates according to its own logic.

Both media publish explanatory articles on the cockpit regulations, citing Germanwings and Lufthansa as their main sources. The articles are mainly explanatory and do not include any comments directly related to the crash. However, they differentiate in certain parts of their language, since Bild keeps referring to the co-pilot as the “Amok-pilot”, whereas FOCUS online uses the original term without any negative connotation. Moreover, the public prosecutor holds a press conference explaining in detail in the last half hour before the crash. FOCUS online transcribes the press conference of the prosecutor and quotes the given information and personal comments of the prosecutor without any judgment or comment: “The prosecutor thinks that the co-pilot wanted the doors not to be opened...” Bild on the other hand, does not transcribe the press conference of the prosecutor but uses some of his statement for a comment resorting to connotation when mentioning that “The Amok-pilot had normal breathing while crashing with 149 people”. The medium does not directly say that it is the fault of the co-pilot, but they imply it with this statement.

Germanwings responds to the latest news with a press release and a conference in which the company address the first results of the investigation. They begin the press conference stating that the accident took a “tragic turn” and that the plane “was crashed presumably by the co-pilot of the plane.” The CEO does not confirm that the co-pilot is culpable; he uses irrealis statements when referring to its role: “presumably” and “this leaves us to assume.” The CEO
stresses the fact that “this was an individual event and no system in the world could have managed to prevent that.” With this realis statement, they distance themselves from the incident and reassure that they are not blamable for it. This position can also be identified in this statement: “If a person takes 149 people into the death, then this is something other than suicide.” The medium Bild uses a similar word connotation before when referring to the co-pilot when mentioning the affected actors. However, Bild mentions the actors for a tragic effect, while the company put the emphasis on the fact that this cannot be a suicide since more than one person is affected by it. Germanwings does not directly confirm that the crash is caused by the co-pilot since it was not definitely confirmed by the investigators. However, they had to address this issue otherwise the media would probably have started speculating, as Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2011) argue. The findings of Nijkrake, Gosselt and Gutteling (2015) reveal that the media reframe their news according to the company’s response, which FOCUS online did when outlining the company’s annotation.

The other articles from Bild focus on interviews with psychologist and experts in this field. One of them is entitled “It was planned and did not occur spontaneously,” where the medium tries to find answers for the reason of the crash. Even though the interviewee gives answers in a general way, the medium makes the connection to the airplane crash, saying that “the people in the surrounding of the co-pilot could have noticed something”. This statement implies that the incident could have been avoided. The tabloid’s narrative is accusative, while FOCUS online aims its attention at the relatives and their pain.

March 27, 2015
The team investigating the crash focuses on the co-pilot and his private life. They discover that he suffered from depression and that he paused his pilot education for a couple of months because of that.

Both media question neighbors and friends of the co-pilot after news went viral about speculations of his mental health. FOCUS online announces that a newspaper reportedly discovered that the prosecutor found a sick leave note in the trash bin of the co-pilot’s apartment. The website uses an irrealis statement to affirm that this has not been confirmed yet. In the second part of the article, it cites the prosecutor affirming the news, using a realis statement.

Bild, however, publishes an article along with an image of the co-pilot in front of the Golden Gate Bridge with this caption: “This Bridge is popular and has a cult-status among suicide killers.” This medium denounces the co-pilot even before the company confirms that he is to blame. Allan (2006) finds while analyzing the coverage of Princess Diana’s death, that newspapers all over the world had already mentioned her death even though it was not
confirmed at the point of publication. *Bild* merely acts according to the definition of the media’s logic. The media did not publish many items before *Germanwings*’ press conference on that day. The predominant actors during their press conference are the holding company *Lufthansa* and the co-pilot. The affected company denounces during their conference the knowledge of sick leave. Furthermore, they stress that “nothing seemed weird during his education at *Lufthansa*. *Bild* jumps on this declaration and writes in bold “Really? Nothing unusual?” This sentence includes word connotations and is a sarcastic comment about the company. In spite of not adding more information to this comment, it becomes clear to the reader that the underlying question is: “You did not realize that he was sick?” - a strong critique of the company for not being able to notice the co-pilot’s problems. Moreover, the medium publishes a hypothetical article that describes the thoughts of the co-pilot during his last day before the crash. While doing this, they portray the co-pilot in the way they perceive him, which does not reflect the reality. This reinforces Altheide’s (2014) assertion that the mass media want to entertain the public and not merely inform them, and this especially the case with online media (Bucy, 2005).

*FOCUS online*, on the contrary, transcribes the press conference and does not add any further comments on that matter. It does not use the same type of narrative throughout the coverage of the incident but align their communication towards the crisis communication of the company.

**March 28, 2015**

March 28, 2015, does not reveal new insights on the co-pilot’s life and the media do not publish as many articles as they did during the previous days. Since there are no new revelations about the cause, they mostly focus on testimonials from relatives or acquaintances.

*Bild* conducts an interview including exclusively one actor: the ex-girlfriend of the co-pilot. She told the medium that she was aware of his problems and that she broke up with him because he was too “creepy.” “*FOCUS online* publishes the same article and mentions *Bild* as the source of information. This is an interesting turn in the media’s coverage, since *FOCUS online* merely uses the company, prosecutor or other newspapers as a source of information but never the tabloid. One assumption could be that since it is an article within the human-interest frame, there is no need for external confirmation. Furthermore, the newspaper does not highlight the same information from the interview. While *Bild* put “creepy” and “had problems” in bold, *FOCUS online* focuses on the detail of his loss of vision the ex-girlfriend mentioned. In spite of using the same information and source, it still frames it differently.
*Germanwings* remains quiet during this day and merely publishes one statement saying that they were not aware of any of the issues the co-pilot had and that he kept everything to himself. In this press release, they openly request that the media do not interview the relatives in these “dark times.” Furthermore, *Germanwings* declares that they will answer “as transparently and quickly as possible”. As Coombs (2011) mentions, it is crucial for the company to keep communicating even if they do not have new revelations otherwise they might be perceived as not credible.

**March 29, 2015**

The flow of information on the March 29 is similar to the coverage the day before. There are no new revelations; the media publish mainly human-interest articles and the company remains silent during that day.

As there are no new revelations, the media focus on stories about the relatives, experts and details of the prosecutor’s previous press conferences. *Bild* presents a detailed timeline of the recordings from the black box. They accentuate terms such as “screams” or “desperate” to emphasize the terror of the incident. The main actor of this paper is the pilot of the airplane. The tabloid portrays him as an unsuccessful hero when mentioning that he “desperately tries to open the door” just before they all died. Gitlin (1992) points out that one of the frames from the media was to put certain people forward and that those presented people get more attention from the public. In the same article, *Bild* enumerate the families that could not say goodbye to their relatives and add a short portrait about the “Amok-pilot.” In this article, the newspaper compares the “good” pilot that tried to save everyone and the “bad” co-pilot that killed them all. *Bild* uses simple and clear language to make this comparison, corroborating Gitlin’s (1992) affirmation that the media oversimplify reality in order for the public understand concepts related to events better.

*FOCUS online* transcribes the company’s discourse, and bases its arguments on the prosecutor’s findings and publishes mainly human-interest stories. However, on March 29 the website publishes an article from *Bild* in which it speculates over the eye issues of the co-pilot. Both media use a similar discourse, as they use similar vocabulary and actors. *Bild* mentions doctors and family members as its main source of information. *FOCUS online*, on the other hand, points out that all of its information comes from *Bild*. While *Germanwings* say nothing, both media speculate over the reason of the depression. The propensity towards speculation by *Bild* and *FOCUS online* supports Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger’s (2011) argument that the media starts speculating on questions concerning the crisis if information is not available.
March 30, 2015

The prosecutor extends the investigations and thoroughly checks the background of the co-pilot by conducting a house search. The team of the investigation communicates their findings to the public.

The media cover the press releases of the prosecutor and give further details on the current stage of the analysis. *FOCUS online* transcribe the press conference of the prosecutor and use quotes to back up its information. The article involves actors such as the co-pilot, the doctors that took care of him and the members of the investigation team. *FOCUS online* use 3 realis statements when quoting the prosecutor, affirming that the findings are correct. The narrative is explanatory and informative since the website mentions details of the findings with no comment. *Bild* publishes an article with a catchy headline, entitled “That’s the biggest police investigation for centuries”. It does not transcribe the prosecutor’s press conference but uses some of his statements as proof of its previous articles on that matter. The newspaper draws on the the prosecutor’s affirmation that the co-pilot took a six-month break from his education, addressing a direct question to the CEO of *Germanwings*: “What are you saying now Mr. *Germanwings*?”. *Bild* addresses this question to the affected company since they previously mentioned that he was in “perfect condition to fly”. Allan (2006) warns that if the company is perceived as irresponsible, the media’s use of an unfavorable narrative gets greater, too. *Germanwings*, in order to be perceived as trustworthy, must address those findings (Ulmer, Sellnow, Seeger 2011). The company does react to those findings and holds a press conference providing further details on the co-pilot’s education. *Germanwings* asserts that this terrible accident occurred because of one “individual” and because they to see what was going to happen. By pointing to the co-pilot as the reason for the crash, they distance themselves from the cause and limit the damage to their reputation, which Fink (1986) asserts is crucial in the chronic crisis stage.
7. Conclusion

The aim of this study is to identify if a frame alignment occurs from the beginning by the media and the company when an extraordinary crisis occurs without any warning signs. This study has been conducted by identifying different theoretical concepts, such as the media’s and the crisis communication logic, media framing and different communication life-cycles. The Germanwings airplane crash in March 2015 was chosen as a case study for the empirical segment of the paper. The study conducts a qualitative analysis on the company’s crisis communication and two different media items in order to identify the differences and similarities in framing.

One of the research questions aims to compare the framing process of two different types of media. Bild is commonly known as a sensational newspaper, whereas FOCUS online is more driven towards the representation of facts. McCombs (2014) affirms that "news about plane crashes and skyjacking offers another example of a link between agenda-setting effects and risk avoidance behaviour", which explains why two different types of media focus on the same event. Nijrake, Gosselt and Gutteling (2015) find that the media constantly reframe their communication according to the company’s press conferences and press releases. This study, investigating an unsuspected event, supports this finding through framing analysis which it applies on FOCUS online. The website does not speculate over facts not supported by either the prosecutor or another trustworthy source. However, FOCUS online still publishes several articles with a human interest frame to accentuate the importance of this crash, for example when publishing articles about the relatives and their sorrow. Bild on the other hand, is not thorough in its coverage. The tabloid does not pick up all of the press conferences or press releases from Germanwings. Moreover, Bild frequently speculates on the cause without mentioning any sources and merely use realis statements to affirm its position. In comparison, FOCUS online always mentioned its sources and only uses realis statements once the information is either confirmed by the company or by the head of the investigation. Bild published 8 irrealis statements; compared to FOCUS online that published only one irrealis statement. This highlights a dramatic difference in how the two media covered the event. Schifferes and Coulter (2012) show that public’s attention towards speculating media decreases, relying merely on trusted sources, such as the company. However, the public’s perception is not part of the analysis but can be included in further research on this subject. During the first two days, the coverage of both media was similar. Once the information leaked that it might have been the co-pilot, their coverage drastically changed. Bild renamed the co-pilot in a pejorative way and commented on the happening. FOCUS online continued its objective news coverage on the accident.
The second research questions aims to discern if there is a frame alignment from the beginning of the crisis between the affected company, Germanwings and the media Bild and FOCUS online. The results of the analysis reveal that the company merely communicated according to their own logic: they did not confirm information without proving that it relies on facts (Coombs (2011). Germanwings frames in the same manner as FOCUS online. The similarity is most probably due to the fact that the medium adapts the company’s communication. Howell and Miller (2006) ascertain that the coverage of the mass media can have an impact on the company's discourse. Furthermore, they assert that the organization should develop different message for each of the stages within Fink's (1986) crisis life-cycle model. The findings of this study do prove that, since the company mainly focuses on giving updates regarding the passengers during the acute crisis stage. However, during the chronic crisis stage, they openly asked the media not to speculate on the cause or on the background of the co-pilot. Germanwings reiterates initially that the company is like a family. When the prosecutor discovers that the co-pilot is the reason for the cause, the company does not mention this anymore. In the beginning of the crash, Bild frames the incident in line with the company's discourse. Nonetheless, the more information external sources reveal, the less attention the medium devotes to Germanwings and their communication. This might be due to the fact that the company reduces their online communication. FOCUS online on the other hand, relies during the first week on the company's crisis communication and frames the incident in line with Germanwings’ discourse. Van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes and Vliegenthart (2013) show that the media make different sense of the incident than the company but that their frames align over time. This study does not ascertain Van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes and Vliegenthart’s findings, since Bild behaves in the opposite way and FOCUS online aligns its frames from the beginning towards the company's discourse.

This study shows that in times of unexpected crises the media align their communication from the beginning of the event. However, a sensational newspaper like Bild does not rely on the company’s crisis communication once the investigation reveals sensitive material. The more factual-based medium, on the other hand, maintains the same frame-alignment as the company even after disclosure of new revelations.

Limitations and further research

This study tries to build the path for further research in the field of frame-alignment of media and crisis communication in times of extraordinary crises. Due to the fact that this particular study conducts its research on one specific crisis, it cannot be said to be representative of all incidents and crises of the same nature. Furthermore, analyzing the first week heavily restricted the collection of data and might have left out some other important aspects.
Nevertheless, further research should be conducted to affirm the results displayed in this study and shed more light on the process.
8. References


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