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Internal crisis communication and employee engagement: A closer look at multinational companies

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Abstract

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Internal crisis communication has remarkably been neglected both in research and in practice, even if there are studies that claim that internal stakeholders have a pivotal role during a crisis. This study aims to understand how multinationals use internal crisis communication and in what way they engage with their employees before, during, and after a crisis. Using the contingency theory of accommodation along with the high-reliability theory, the analysis showed that multinationals have the resources needed to develop internal crisis communication plans. However, they seem to be preoccupied with fear. Furthermore, culture, both organizational and national culture seem to have clear implications in the way internal crisis communication is practiced.

Keyword: internal crisis communication, crisis communication, organizational culture, culture, high-reliability theory, contingency theory of accommodation, employee engagement, multinationals

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Angelos Vasileioy

1. Introduction

Words like unexpected events, VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) world and crisis have become an integral part of our lives as communicators. The environment that organizations operate in has changed dramatically, and communication professionals face various challenges and deal with unforeseen events on a daily basis. Even if a crisis is not a new phenomenon, nowadays we live in dynamic and turbulent times. All these create a necessity and a challenge for every organization to develop strategies to understand and anticipate stakeholders' perceptions when a crisis occurs. And whilst we are aware that every organization needs to be able to communicate its efforts effectively and strategically to its stakeholders and its publics (Jin, Pang, and Smith, 2018), we also know that organizations tend to neglect to engage with their employees during turbulent times; they fail to understand that employees can become ambassadors of the organization they work for during rough times. Since employees form one of the most critical groups of stakeholders for every organization, Fearn-Banks (2011) called them the "functional public" because they are "the most believable spokespersons" (ibid).

The literature so far within crisis communication has focused primarily on its external aspect (Strandberg, 2016). Heide and Simonsson (2014) pointed out that the internal aspect of crisis communication "has remarkably been neglected" in the past. However, during the last decade, there is a growing body of literature which recognizes the importance of the internal crisis communication. Considering that crisis is a "major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization ...and can sometimes threaten the existence of the organization" (Ravazzani, 2016), the internal aspect is crucially dealing with such a phenomenon. A crisis is perceived as a "natural stage in an ongoing and natural evolution" (Kersten, 2005) of an organization, which has the potential to foster organizational learning and the ability to transform the organization itself. Employees can play a key role as sensemakers and sensegivers (Ravazzani, 2016). And strategic communication defined as "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission" (Hallahan et al., 2007) can en-

hance further internal crisis communication as a practice. As a result, there is a need to look into internal crisis communication from a strategic point of view.

Furthermore, there is a group of organizations which deals on a continuous basis with unexpected events because the business environment has become increasingly complex (Michel and Shaked, 1986; Ruël & Suren, 2017). These organizations are called multinationals companies (MNCs), and they are enterprises which produce or sell goods or services in various countries. MNCs are characterized by their large size, but also from the fact that they are active in many countries, and their operations are controlled from the head offices (Ruël & Suren, 2017). The fact that this study focuses on multinationals is not because they are experts in the field, but because I argue that multinationals like high-reliability organizations (HROs) have no other choice but to function in a reliable way (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). In case that reliability is compromised, they can face severe harm. Furthermore, multinationals face a more significant challenge to cope with such a phenomenon due to their diverse workforce; for them, it is not only about introducing internal crisis communication practices but also overcome language barriers and cultural nuances. Ravazzani (2016) observed that employees' perceptions and interpretations are made through the lenses of culture, and this is a big challenge for communication professionals working in MNCs. They need to create a broader understanding inside the organization regardless of hierarchical position, nationality, profession, networks, etc. Communication practitioners also need to find a fine balance between the organizational culture and the culture that every individual brings in the workplace. Additionally, another reason to study how internal crisis communication is practiced in MNCs, is that prior literature has focused mainly on the external aspect of crisis communication.

In the current study, I will use the high-reliability theory along with the contingency theory of accommodation as a theoretical framework to understand how multinational companies or multinationals (MNCs) use internal crisis communication strategies and in what ways they address their employees in those strategies. A great mix of interviewees consisting of predominantly in-house communicators - most of them with managerial responsibilities - and also a few crisis communication consultants and freelancers, based on a purposeful sampling method and a social constructionism perspective, create the puzzle of the current study. The interviewees based in headquarters or regional offices will provide valuable insights on the role of culture in internal crisis communication, how they deal with managing unexpected events and to what extent the diverse workforce influences their roles and practices. Most of the commu-

nication professionals are based across Europe. The reason why I combined communication professionals from headquarters but also from regional offices is that this combination will produce more context-specific (Ravazzani, 2016). Overall, this project provides an opportunity to advance the understanding of internal crisis communication and its importance by providing valuable insights coming from multinationals.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this study is twofold. First of all, to give a better understanding of how multinational companies practice internal crisis communication. Secondly, to further develop the arena of internal crisis communication by using the high-reliability theory and the contingency theory in the context of multinational companies. The findings will provide new insights and - in relation to the existing research - a holistic understanding from a communication professionals' perspective. The research question, related to the ways that employees addressed in ICC strategies before, during and after a crisis, is the following:

How do multinational companies use internal crisis communications?

It is crucial to mention here that employees in MNCs are not a homogeneous and static group of people. They are quite a diverse group where interaction takes place on an ongoing basis. I believe that organizations are changing in a variety of ways and partially due to crises.

Assuming that organizational culture also plays an essential role in the interpretation of various events among other things, it is critical to include the aspect of organizational culture in our discussion. Research has shown that the better prepared a company is, the more likely it is to survive a crisis or to prosper from it (Barton et al., 2003; Priporas & Vangelinos, 2008). Consequently, multinationals seem to be the right choice because I presuppose that they have both quite diverse workforce and strong organizational cultures. And by using the phrase 'strong organization culture', I adopted in the current project the definition proposed by Krajcsák (2018) who said that "values like collaboration, trust, support, affiliation, growth, variety, autonomy, attention to detail, communication, competence, competition, achievement, routinization, formalization, and consistency" define a strong organizational culture.

1.2 Delimitations

There is an increasing interest in internal crisis communication as I mentioned earlier. Regardless of this growing body of literature, no studies are looking specifically at practices of internal crisis communication in multinational companies. Additionally, the employee's role in turbulent times has been neglected both in research and in practice (Falkheimer and Heide, 2018) as argued. Having in mind those as mentioned earlier, the current study focuses on multinationals. However, due to time limitations, my empirical material is based on qualitative interviews with communication professionals either as in-house practitioners (headquarters or regional offices) or consultants/freelancers in crisis communication. This means that in the current study, the communication professional's perspective is studied. There were no interviews conducted with employees, which would be worth researching in the future. Moreover, most of the communication practitioners are based in Europe, and they work for European multinationals or multinationals that operate in various European countries among others globally. There are three exceptions though; two of communication professionals are based in the Middle East and one in India.

Most of the in-house communicators were identified through the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD). EACD was founded in 2006 in Brussels and aims to "attract, inspire and engage current and future communication leaders to drive excellence in communication profession" (EACD, 2018), according to their mission statement. More than 100 in-house communicators from 23 countries are members of EACD. Consequently, EACD members are the majority of the interviewees along with crisis communication consultants/freelancers who contributed to this study with their valuable insights.

1.3 Disposition

This study will be comprised of the following sections. First, the introduction chapter presents the focus of the research and states the purpose of the current study and the research question. Then the literature review chapter presents previous research concerning internal crisis communication as a field, as well as internal communication in multinationals while sense-making and employee engagement in times of crises is the last topic covered. The contingency theory of accommodation together with the high-reliability theory will be described in the third chapter. These two theories will be the basis of the analysis to understand how multinationals practice internal crisis communication. Further, in the methodology section, the research design and strategy will be described, followed by the analysis and the discussion of the findings. The current study concludes with a section about suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

This chapter will provide a representation of the discussions in the arena of internal crisis communication, as well as in internal communication in multinationals whilst sensemaking and employee engagement in times of crises will be the last focus of this chapter. The aim is to provide every reader with a comprehensive review of what has been written until now (Styhre, 2013). Here, I would like to mention that there are multiple definitions of what a crisis is, but all of them overlap. Fearn-Banks (2011) adopt a quite broad definition according to which crisis is

“a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name. A crisis interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of the organization”.

Coombs (2015), on the other hand, divides crises into disasters and/or organizational crises. He defines disasters as incidents that occur unexpectedly, pose a threat to the organization and action needs to be taken in order to bring the organization back to normality (Coombs 2015; Quarantelli, 2005), whilst organizational crisis for Coombs (2015) is an unforeseen event that poses a danger to stakeholders’ expectations and has the potential to harm to the organization. In 2010, Falkheimer and Heide proposed another definition according to which crisis is a phenomenon that takes place when an anomaly occurs and the system in an organization is destabilized which has two significant consequences; firstly, it creates uncertainty and, secondly, action needs to be taken. Now that we established a common understanding of what a crisis is, I will continue with the review of the existing literature.

2.1 Internal Crisis Communication

Taking into account the fact that internal crisis communication (ICC) is an area that has not been the focus of research as external crisis communication has, I argue that for many scholars and practitioners, external crisis communication has become a synonym to crisis commu-

nication. Recently, researchers have shown an increased interest in internal crisis communication acknowledging that amongst many stakeholders, the media and interested citizens, internal stakeholders are the most essential and dominant stakeholders in times of a crisis (Van der Meer et al., 2017). This specific interest in ICC over the last decade can be seen from the considerable amount of studies published. To begin with, the following definition is the most precise produced so far: Internal crisis communication (ICC) alludes to “the communicative interaction among managers and employees, in a private or public organization, before, during and after an organizational or societal crisis” (Johansen et al., 2012). In one of the first studies in ICC, Heide and Simonsson (2014) focused on communication practitioners’ roles and practices in an attempt to develop ICC further. They suggested that communication professionals working in ICC should be more proactive than reactive across all three phases (pre-crisis, crisis, post-crisis) and their work should not be limited only to information distributors. On the contrary, they suggest a strategic perspective on the communication’s role and responsibilities which will create “new demands on communication professionals that go beyond the operational and tactical roles in the acute phase of the crisis” (Heide and Simonsson, 2014). Communication practitioners, therefore, need to act more strategically, not only from a communications perspective but also with a better business understanding.

The existing body of research on ICC suggests that organizations underutilize ICC and, more particularly, there are no “concrete actions and a related communication strategy” (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015) to support employees. Strandberg and Vigsø’s study (2016) has established the importance of separate strategies internally and externally for an organization. Copying already existing strategies (mainly external communication strategies) internally, cannot fulfill the mission of an internal communications’ plan to create a shared understanding and maintain trust. Employees play a crucial role as communicators internally and externally. They need to be empowered to face a crisis, to be able to make sense of the situation and answer possible questions coming from families and friends even from journalists (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011). Mazzei and Ravazzani (2015) suggest that organizational communication is the function that holds together the entire organization. This means that the contribution of ICC is of strategic importance to maintain trust relationships with employees. Furthermore, multiple organizations change the name of internal communications to organizational or employee communications.

On the other hand, management needs to treat employees not only as receivers of information but also as senders. Establishing a two-way communication flow, more integrated management processes that enable co-creation of meaning, support problem solving and boost organizational learning are key factors for a successful ICC plan (Strandberg and Vigsø's, 2016). A crisis internally has the potential to make even more evident dysfunctional patterns produced by the organizational culture (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). Mindful communication practitioners who have a crisis perspective have the ability, on the one hand, to detect and collect information on weak signals of changes at an early stage and, on the other hand, to act and improvise in order to deal with it (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). Finally, communication professionals need to be consistent with the organizational culture when they create narratives and stories (sense-making) otherwise a potential mismatch can generate harm between the employees and the management (Strandberg and Vigsø's, 2016). To put it in a nutshell, ICC is a pivotal part of crisis communication and carries a heavy burden to maintain sustainable relationships with internal stakeholders before, during and after a crisis. As it has become evident from the existing body of research in ICC, employees are the most critical group of internal stakeholders. The following section will examine previous research within internal crisis communication regarding culture.

2.2 Culture and internal communication in crisis situations

As I mentioned earlier culture imposes another layer of complexity for communication professionals. Silvia Ravazzani (2016) highlighted the importance of employees' cultural background in internal communication and more particularly during a crisis. Her study pays particular attention to the role of line managers and local communicators as the facilitators of sensemaking during times of crisis. Local managers and communicators act as cultural interpreters (Lyra, 1991) and line communication between managers and employees, either in local or global level, serve as the most important component facilitating sensemaking and organizational learning (Mounter, 2003; Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2011; Johansen et al., 2012). Employees are considered active sensegivers and communicators because they contribute both as internal communicators as well as acting as external corporate ambassadors (Ravazzani, 2016). While culture can be a struggle for communicators in their strategy, many managers acknowledge the benefits of multiculturalism by gaining a better understanding of external constituents and by boosting internal creativity (Ravazzani, 2016). Many studies emphasize the importance of employees' diversity of cultural background and its strategic value

in times of crises (Willihnganz et al., 2004; Falkheimer and Heide, 2006; Olofsson, 2011; Ravazzani, 2016). Additionally, employees interpret crisis situations through the lenses of culture (Eisenberg and Riley, 2000; Oliveira, 2013), and therefore communication should be framed according to the local cultural norms, too. It has also been observed that there is a significant difference in the approach of internal crisis communication between the headquarters and the local offices (Ravazzani, 2016). Taken together, all these studies suggest that employees are not static actors but instead they engage in various ways.

Language or cultural differences though is only one piece of the puzzle for communication professionals. Adaptation of internal crisis communication is not just the translation of the text produced in headquarters. Local tailoring includes proper framing of the message, the right choice of channel (-s) and the most credible spokesperson/communicator (Ravazzani, 2016; Mounter 2003, Oliveira, 2013). Recently, Dhanesh and Sriramesh (2017) conducted a study about the implications of culture in crisis communication strategies and they found that top management failed to intensify and handle a crisis in the most effective way and it ended with the replacement of its managing director, Etienne Benet, with Suresh Narayanan, who had started his career at Nestlé India. Both authors suggest that “crisis communication literature would be greatly enhanced by integrating culture in all its forms - political, legal, economic, activist, societal and organizational and media - of an organization into crisis communication discussions” (Dhanesh and Sriramesh, 2017). Even if the paper focuses mainly on the external crisis communication, I believe that it is also relevant to internal crisis communication strategies having in mind that multinationals operate across different countries and their workforce is increasingly multicultural. The primary challenge for communication professionals is that employees’ perceptions and interpretations are made through the lenses of culture (Ravazzani, 2016). Nestle India’s case is an example of how important it is to train executive management of the cultural impact as part of internal crisis communication preparedness plans.

In the light of recent developments, Falkheimer and Heide (2006) pointed out that “crisis communication takes place at different levels, interpersonal as well as mass-mediated levels” and culture shapes the understanding in both levels. They raised the fact that pre-crisis plans do not take into consideration cultural differences, which was confirmed from Ravazzani (2016) study among Danish companies. Falkheimer and Heide (2006) suggested culture shapes also trust issues differently in various contexts. As they put it “future public relations

practitioners need to be more sensitive to the multicultural nuances of different publics, both in an international arena and within their own geographic locales.” Here, the question is whether multinationals take into consideration multiculturalism in their internal crisis communication plans or they create a strategy in headquarters from a homogeneous group of people expecting that a quite diverse group of employees will react the same way. Falkheimer and Heide (2006) adopted a social constructionist perspective demonstrating the importance of the language. However, language is only one aspect of ICC. Communicators should take very seriously multicultural or cross-cultural communication in their attempt to deal with a crisis by promoting sensitivity to cultural nuances (Falkheimer and Heide, 2006) and also to question assumptions taken for granted within the organization (Wrench, 2007) as the workforce of multinationals changes dramatically. Employees are not a homogeneous group of people (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011) and engaging with as many employees as possible provides a better understanding and supports employees during these difficult times. According to McKinsey&Company (2018) organizations which address an inclusive company culture across cultural differences could significantly strengthen organizational effectiveness. Moreover, organizations need to overcome complexities related to educational level or the location of the employees sitting behind a desk, being in a laboratory or the field (Ravazzani, 2016). An organization in order to be effective values sensemaking and employee engagement during turbulent times, and this is further discussed in the following section.

2.3 Sensemaking and employee engagement in times of crisis

Crises limit the available time to engage with stakeholders internally and externally and put even more pressure to maintain “intensive forms of stakeholder communication” (Van der Meer et al., 2017). It has been observed though that during a crisis, managerial isolation occurs, and this phenomenon increases uncertainty and causes confusion across stakeholders (Van der Meer et al., 2017). Executive management should be available to provide answers and facilitate two-way communication with their employees. By doing this, they can get feedback, deal with rumors and lead the way on how to handle the crisis. Executive management also needs to practice what they preach for; this means that their actions should be in accordance with the objectives/messages of the strategy. Interestingly, Montague (2016) claims that employees in the initial face of the crisis “might be seen acting as external stakeholders to the organization” escalating the crisis. Although this concept can be challenged, we should not forget that employees are also free citizens who potentially might be members of social net-

works, consumers or shareholder for instance (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011). Van der Meer et al. (2017) proved that “well-nurtured pre-crisis relationships with internal and external stakeholders ... are found to have substantial explanatory power for the relationship in crisis times next to the stakeholder pressure”. As a result, communication practitioners should work hard to create and maintain deep trust relationships with the employees even before a crisis occurs (O’Hair et al., 1995; Coombs and Holladay, 2002; Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2011).

The relationship between an organization and its stakeholders has become more complicated nowadays, and this is partly because employees are considered active sensemakers and sensegivers. Sensemaking and sensegiving are two concepts that are interrelated (Rouleau, 2005); sensemaking can be described as an ongoing process where individuals and teams construct or/and reconstruct meaning and understanding together (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005). On the contrary, sensegiving for Maitlis (2005) is a process where individuals try to influence others; it is an attempt to affect sensemaking to a preferred outcome (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005). Consequently, one could argue that whilst sensemaking and sensegiving need time. However, when a crisis occurs time is precious, and it will be quite interesting to see how MNCs plan to allocate time to their employees.

Research suggests that “employees can be mobilized before, during, and after a crisis situation” (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011). Weick and Sutcliffe (2007) recognize the critical role of resilience within the organization. Organizations need to be mindful on a continuous basis, and this will enable them to prevent crises or recover with the minimum cost (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007). Organizations that treat employees as static actors will be forced to face the consequences when for instance employees distance themselves from the organizational identity (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011) because they do not feel proud of the organization that they work for. In order to understand the complexity of the phenomenon, we should keep in our minds that employees consume information provided by media and they interpret the events based on their own experiences, too. Consequently, even if employees have a common characteristic which is a contractual relationship with the organization (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011) they are quite diverse when it comes to many other aspects.

Existing research has shown that stakeholder involvement in times of a crisis determines the outcome (McDonald et al., 2010). McDonald et al. study (2010) examine stakeholders’ reactions to company crisis communication and causes. Even though there are no findings for em-

ployees as a separate group - which once again indicates that employees' role during a crisis may be substantially underestimated - one of the conclusions is that measuring attitude can provide a shorthand predictor of a likely outcome (McDonald et al., 2010). Coombs and Holladay (2002) emphasized that crisis responsibility has the potential to determine emotions and future organizational interactions. Communication practitioners then need to relate their strategy with the mission of the organization, the heritage and the history that make the employees proud.

Furthermore, many studies have divided crises based on their locus. This division is not applicable in our case because even the locus of a crisis is external, I argue that as long as the organization is affected, the employees are affected, too. The example of Jack Ma (Kim et al., 2016) shows that the strategic involvement of a CEO in crisis response is of great importance, especially if there is a good match between the CEO's personality and the adopted strategy. This case illustrates how a CEO can be utilized internally and externally to help an organization recover from a crisis. Frandsen and Johansen (2011) suggest that the type of the relationship, the stake, the identity and the degree of identification with the organization, plus the role of the employees as both senders and receivers of internal crisis communication can guide the internal communication strategy.

To sum up, there is a need for an interactive framework taking into consideration the complexity and the dynamics of a crisis and defining both managers and employees as active sensemakers and sensegivers (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011). ICC is something quite complicated, broader, and dynamic and as it was explained it clearly does not follow a linear evolution process. It is quite contingent. As the reality has changed dramatically, communication has become more complex and employees have become a quite critical group of people for every organization respectively. A two-way symmetrical communication from managers to employees and vice versa might sound like a necessity. However, there are cases where this might not be possible (due to regulations) or the most appropriate tactic. Finally, we should not ignore that the communication flow is also horizontal between the employees themselves across organizational boundaries.

This chapter indicates that ICC is an area that has been substantially under research and has the potential to be of great help to crisis managers. The next section, therefore, will discuss two relevant theories; the contingency theory of accommodation, and the high-reliability theo-

ry. The following chapter will explore how both theories evolved and their usefulness for multinationals.

3. Theory

In this chapter, I will present the two theories that I will use in this study in order to provide a better understanding of the current status among multinationals when it comes to ICC. The first one is the contingency theory according to which everything is contingent to various factors. The second theory I will use is the high-reliability theory; this suggests that organizations should act mindfully and by following certain principles, they can either protect or minimize harm to the organization. Both of them will be useful tools to challenge communication practitioners whether they act mindfully, and will provide the opportunity to see if and when it is possible to engage with the employees before, during or after a crisis having in mind that multinationals have a diverse workforce. These two theories will be used later on to conduct the analysis and to address the purpose of the current study. I will start by presenting the contingency theory of accommodation that was proposed in 1997.

3.1 Contingency theory of accommodation

Since the 1950s, organizational research challenged the current practice of one size fits all. This stream of researchers led to what organizational theorists now call a contingency theory of management (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). In the arena of communication Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, and Mitrook in 1997 proposed the contingency theory of accommodation with their study called “It Depends: A Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations” (Hwang and Kim, 2017). More particularly, this theory "depicts an organization's communication stances using a continuum model, with pure accommodation on one end, and pure advocacy on the other" (Xie, 2017). According to Cancel et al. (1997), the contingency theory provides an alternative to the normative excellence theory of public relations (Grunig & Grunig, 2008), and attempts to capture the nuances and complexity of the practice of public relations more realistically (Xie, 2017). Cancel et al. (1997) identified through an extensive literature review a matrix of 86 variables that influence the communication stance between advocacy and accommodation. They divided these variables based on whether they were

external or internal to the organization (Xie, 2017). For the purpose of the current study in ICC, I will focus on the internal variables. Internal variables include companies characteristics, public relations department characteristics, characteristics of the dominant coalition, internal threats, individual characteristics (public relations practitioner, dominant coalition, and line-managers), and relationship characteristics (Xie, 2017).

More research further divided these variables into different categories (Xie, 2017). Cancel et al. (1999) interviewed public relations professionals and categorized these variables based on temporal order into predisposing and situational variables. Predisposing variables "are pre-existing variables that influence mainly by shaping the organization's predisposition towards a public, and situational variables are the specific, dynamic variables that shape the stances during the communication process" (Cancel et al., 1999). Cameron, Cropp, and Reber (2001) attempted to increase parsimony of the contingency theory by identifying thematic groups for the variables. They identified six variables as proscriptive variables that limit accommodation, including moral conviction, multiple publics, regulatory constraints, management pressure, jurisdictional issues, and legal constraints (Cameron et al., 2001). Further research has tested the 86 contingent variables and categorized them into 12 factors into the external and internal dimensions (Shin, Cameron & Cropp, 2006). Finally, a case study of Orlando Magic's public relations efforts to secure a new arena supported the utility of contingency theory and illustrated the three proscriptive variables of moral conviction, multiple publics and management pressure in empirical data (Mitrook, Parish, & Seltzer, 2008).

"It depends" means that the communication practice varies from time to time based on contingencies. For instance, accommodation cannot always be used as an option because sometimes it is an unethical choice or prohibited by antitrust laws (Xie, 2017) and the same goes for advocacy. The current qualitative study is one additional to many qualitative studies in research of contingent variables (Reber & Cameron, 2003) and will provide additional empirical material about the contingency theory of accommodation by examining the internal variables in times of crisis in multinationals companies. Moreover, this study attempts to research the validity of contingent variables as Cancel et al. (1999) have called for. More specifically the contingency factors that I am looking for with the current study are the following: organizational culture, organizational structures, centralized or decentralized approach, internal communication, existence or non existence of crisis response team, type of training, experience of communication professionals dealing with crisis, support and

understanding of the role of communications, degree of line management or local communicators involvement and communication competency; all these contingencies are taken from the categorization that Pang, Jin, and Cameron proposed (2010). So now that the contingency theory of accommodation has been presented, I will proceed with the high-reliability theory that will serve as the second guiding link.

3.2 High-reliability theory

The high-reliability theory was an outcome of studying many years certain types of organizations which were later called High-Reliability Organizations (HROs). HROs was a concept developed in the University of California at Berkeley where among the pioneers was Karlene Roberts, then called “the mother of HROs” (Bourrier, 2005; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). These organizations have succeeded in avoiding catastrophes in an environment where accidents can be expected due to risk factors and complexity (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). In a nutshell, what characterizes HROs is that they manage successfully dynamic and unexpected situations (Schulz, Geithner & Mistele, 2017). There is a series of principles that enable HROs to do so. Here, I will follow the categorization that Weick and Sutcliffe (2017) adopted in their book called "Managing the Unexpected: Resilient Performance in an Age of Uncertainty." In other words, HROs are attentive to weak signals; they have systems to detect small failures at early stages, and then they address them with a strong response. Interestingly, HROs have lower scores in mistakes even if they operate in an ever-changing environment where unexpected events take place continuously and statistically someone could expect more errors (Bourrier, 2005; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001). In the following sections I will elaborate more on the main principles of high-reliability theory, and afterwards, I will present outcomes of studies that used high-reliability theory across different industries.

3.2.1 Principles of high-reliability theory

The high-reliability theory represents an ideal situation where an organization meets specific criteria as a result of collective mindfulness (Weick et al., 2000; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2006; Schulz, Geithner & Mistele, 2017). HROs strive for constant training hoping that they can gain experience even in simulations with all possible scenarios that they might face (Roberts, 1990). That is of great importance because recently many IT-related risks and crises (i.e., Maersk cyber attack in 2017) came to the surface alarming many organizations including multinationals to take measures to prevent similar situations in the future. The principles that

make HROs unique are preoccupation with failure, reluctance to simplify, sensitivity to operations, commitment to resilience, and deference to expertise (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). The first characteristic of a High-Reliability organization is the preoccupation with failure meaning that they encourage individuals and teams to report failures because they know that small failures can signal more significant problems (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). Moreover, there are systems in place that track small failures but also their approach when it comes to mistakes is quite different. Any failure is a source of organizational learning and improving reliability whilst individuals or teams in HROs try “to be acutely aware of significant details, to notice errors in the making, and to have shared expertise and freedom to act on what they notice”, this is what consists collective mindfulness (Schulz, Geithner & Mistele, 2017). On the other hand, they are reluctant towards oversimplification (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007; Schulz, Geithner & Mistele, 2017) meaning they know that our world is quite complex and unpredictable: “less simplification allows to see more” (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). These organizations welcome diverse experience, scrutiny, and negotiation without neglecting nuances that diverse people have the ability to detect (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). HROs remain sensitive to operations; this means that members of the organizations have a fair idea of business understanding and the bigger picture (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007; Schulz, Geithner & Mistele, 2017). In my case, I expect that communication professionals dealing with ICC have a strong business understanding because most of them have a managerial position, which gives them more power to influence decision making. Additionally, commitment to resilience for HROs is based on the way that individuals and teams act but also to a great extent on technology (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). These organizations know that there is no perfect system, and this is the reason why they come up with plan B and/or plan C, as sometimes technology can betray us. Last but not least, expertise for HROs embrace diversity for mainly two reasons (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007); firstly, because it helps them to operate in complex environments, and secondly, due to the fact that diverse workforce helps them to do more with the complexities they face. I would say that multinationals have a great advantage here because their workforce is quite diverse, the question though is to what extent they utilize this opportunity. All these principles enable HROs to anticipate but also to contain and bounce back after unexpected events and act mindfully.

More characteristics distinguish HROs from other organizations. Before I proceed to them, I would like to make clear here that there is a distinction among HROs; there are organizations which operate in hazardous environments and organizations that are comprised of teams

prepared to reliably fulfill specific missions like emergency rescue services (Schulz, Geithner & Mistele, 2017). However, another HROs' feature is that organizational culture and leadership along with continuous learning play a pivotal role to enhance high reliability and performance (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007; Schulz, Geithner & Mistele, 2017). Continuous learning means that these organizations strive to gain relevant knowledge, reflect and share experience and develop situations awareness (Schulz, Geithner & Mistele, 2017). Learning is crucial for those organizations. Mistele divides learning into formal and informal; the first one includes any kind of organized learning and the second one consists of experienced learning through realistic simulations and real missions but also as an outcome of reflection to all the above (Schulz, Geithner & Mistele, 2017). Training and simulations on a continuous basis, as well as real participation with the guidance of experienced team members guarantee that newcomers have the needed capabilities while all members keep up to date with new threat and risks (Schulz, Geithner & Mistele, 2017). In other words, they invest a considerable amount of resources to develop contingency plans (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). Mistakes in these organizations are seen as a source of learning while debriefing meetings always follow an exercise or a real case with the intention to illustrate the errors in order "to avoid making the same mistakes in the future" (Schulz, Geithner & Mistele, 2017). As a result, HROs encompass unique structural features; they do not religiously follow the hierarchy but for them, leadership is a dynamic concept which goes hand in hand with expertise, but also they adopt an attitude of fail fast and learn with more risk willingness among its members. On the contrary, I argue that to a significant extent processes and practices are different, but not in ways that are uniquely in multinationals.

Finally, I agree with Rerup (2005) as well as Godé and Lebraty (2015) in their approach that the learning principles of HROs may also be applied to other types of organizations and that will enable them to improve their performance, to cope with flexibility, complexity and quality demands in the volatile times that characterize our world. And this is what I will illustrate in the following section.

3.2.2 High reliability across industries

There is a growing body of literature using the high-reliability theory in various environments, and here I will present some of the most important studies of the last ten years. One of them was conducted by Schulz, Geithner & Mistele (2017), who studied the

implementation of HROs principles in manufacturing companies. They concluded that manufacturing companies could learn to a great extent from HROs learning principles. Nevertheless, this does not mean that high-reliability theory is a panacea due to the unique characteristic of each industry. This is quite relevant for multinationals due to the fact of the different nature of the operations.

The question as to whether high reliability can be transferred to other organizations has triggered both academia and the business community. More specifically, health care is one of the fields with an extensive literature. Many studies came to the conclusion that teamwork is an essential component of high-reliability organizations, and that teamwork can promote safety while operating in complex environments like health care (Roberts et al., 2005; Wilson et al., 2005; Baker et al., 2006). Furthermore, in 2005, Rerup created a new framework for habitual entrepreneurs on how to use their experience successfully in order to discover and exploit new opportunities. He also emphasized the positive and negative outcomes of mindfulness or mindlessness as he calls it (Rerup, 2005); organizations need to be aware of the costs and benefits of being mindful. Another industry that HROs principles were applied is the IT industry. Vogus and Welbourne (2003) found out that reluctance to simplify interpretations, sensitivity to operations and commitment to resilience, generate innovation which leads to better financial performance.

The role of mindfulness in the workplace in relation to authentic functioning and work engagement was studied by Leroy et al. (2013). They suggest that mindfulness at the workplace strengthens the personal resources of work engagement whilst reducing the negative symptoms of burnout. Further research has looked into whether HROs principles can be meaningfully applied in other fields of work (Tamuz and Harrison, 2006; Dos Santos Paulino, 2009; Lekka, 2011; Godé and Lebraty, 2015).

In a nutshell, from the above, one could see strong similarities between the HROs principles and multinationals. Multinationals by following practices of mission-type HROs can become better at situational unpredictability, which will foster flexibility and adaptability to the new circumstances. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how multinationals practice internal crisis communication and whether we can find similarities or differences between multinationals and HROs.

3.3 Reflections

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an overview of the theories that will guide the analysis. Given that internal crisis communication and employee engagement are two areas that overlap and take place only through social interaction, I believe that, on the one hand, the contingency theory of accommodation will be of great value to understand the volatile times that multinationals operate in and, on the other hand, the high-reliability theory will provide a framework of engaging internally with your employees before, during and after a crisis. This is of particular importance in order to build trust between the organization and the employees which I argue goes both ways. You cannot expect from your employees to be trustful when you as an organization are neither trustworthy or you do not trust your people.

The following chapter will present the research design and how I got a better understanding of the way multinationals practice ICC.

4. Methodology and research design

A qualitative research approach will be used in order to gain a better understanding of how multinationals practice ICC and how they engage with their employees during times of crises. A social constructionist perspective will uncover the complexity of such a phenomenon (Charmaz, 2000). This chapter will describe my epistemological point of view, and will present the research strategy that I followed. First of all, I will present my epistemological point of view, and then I will describe the process of how I conducted the interviews, why I chose this method -qualitative interviews-, the selection of the interviewees (purposeful sampling), the interview proceedings and the analytical process as well as the methodological implications and ethical reflections raised during the current study.

4.1 Social constructionism

As Falkheimer and Heide (2006) put it, crisis communication is an area where functionalism and objectivism prevail with only a few exceptions. The current study takes a social constructionism point-of-view representing the shift from a focus on stable organization structures to ever-changing processes. Nowadays, organizations are continually transforming, striving for excellence and adaption to the complex environment (Falkheimer and Heide, 2006) and I argue that multinationals more particularly are doing so in order to outperform the competition. I chose a social constructionism point of view because I believe that as a reflective approach it will enable me to understand how multinationals construct their reality in the field of ICC. This section is representing why I chose this perspective and why I suggest it as the most appropriate in this case.

Social constructionism originates as a reaction against the positivistic research which prevailed in the social science (Gergen, 1998). As a perspective, social constructionism challenges taken-for-granted assumptions (Czarniawska, 2003), such as the notion of a stable organization, the role of the culture and power dynamics (Burr, 1995; Burr, 1998; Falkheimer

and Heide, 2006). Scholars within this tradition challenge also the idea of objective facts (Burr, 1998). They believe that objectivity prevents us to unveil the complexity of organizations (McKinley, 2003) and they talk about people's interaction which enables them to construct themselves and the reality (Burr, 2015). The primary focus is the domain of social interexchange. And this is precisely in the core of the current study; to understand how multinationals engage with their diverse workforce in ICC strategies in order to understand how they construct the reality together.

Furthermore, social constructionism as a standpoint supports that the reality is socially constructed and the main emphasis is on people's interactions, on how people relate to it, what is the meaning of the reality to them and how they engage with it (Berger and Luckmann, 1991; Gergen, 1999). Social constructionism as a perspective neither confirms nor refuses that the world is out there (Schwandt, 2000). According to Patton (2002), different stakeholders may have different experiences, and a social constructionist approach aims to capture these various experiences without categorizing them to right or more true, what social constructionism looks for in multiple realities. These multiple realities are products of interpersonal learning (Shotter and Gergen, 1994) which I argue fosters organizational learning in times of crises through sensemaking and sensegiving. As a result, I see multinationals as organizations that should strive for interaction in our ongoing changing environment.

Language has been in the main focus across studies within the movement of social constructionism (Schwandt, 2000). According to Burr (2015) language "produces and constructs our experience of each other and ourselves"; he supports that is through interaction with language that meanings are produced. However, language by itself does not provide a clear picture of what is going on in an organization (Gergen, 1985). As a result, we need to look further into the organizations in order to understand the process of creating reality. Moreover, for scholars within this tradition, language is not perceived as a passive, simple medium that mirrors an objective reality (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). Nowadays, many multinationals adopt English as a corporate language in order to eliminate miscommunication; communication practitioners though need to be aware of various cultural nuances. The fact that people speak the same language does not equal that people understand the world the same way (Ravazzani, 2016). Plus there is a clear difference between a native English speaker and a person that speaks fluent English, but it is not their mother tongue. The notion of a unitary

national language is a myth. Instead, it is the outcome of collective practice, when people come together, act and make sense (Shotter and Gergen, 1994) developing jointly constructed meanings of the world that form the basis for shared assumptions about reality (Schwandt, 2000). For Weick people actively construct the social reality, and the organization reality for him is a communication product (Falkheimer and Heide, 2006). Consequently, this study examines how multinationals create space for interaction and also how they empower employees to be part of ICC practices, as an alternative to mainstream research conduct in the area which focuses on the language usage in such an environment.

Last but not least, social constructionists do not affirm or deny the existence of the world out there (Schwandt, 2000). Knowledge for a social constructionist is relative to time, place, power and culture (Patton, 2002). Shotter (1993) argues that communication is the medium that produces and reproduces an organization by its members. This study aims to examine the ways employees are involved in internal crises communication strategies. Consequently, communication plays a key role in collaborative decision-making and sensemaking procedures that lead to the social structure. In line with Czarniawska (2003), social constructionism aims to reveal not “nasty plots” but what organizations tend to forget or they do not pay attention to. As I have argued earlier internal crisis communication and employee engagement is one of these areas that many organizations tend to cease to think of deliberately.

4.2 Qualitative interviews

Interviews are amongst the most used methods to conduct studies in social sciences. I chose qualitative interviews because they will enable me to understand how multinationals practice ICC and how they engage with their employees, always given that I will get the communication practitioners’ perspective. Also, they provided me with further insights in regards to communication in multinational environments, challenges what communicators face nowadays in our field, and bring to the surface competencies that every communication practitioner should have in order to make a difference across different industries. I consider qualitative interviews as a conversation that has a structure and a purpose. During an interview, researcher and interviewees jointly construct new knowledge (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Given that the purpose of this study is to understand how communicators practice ICC and their perceptions working for multinational companies, and also how they foster

employee engagement, I have conducted semi-structured interviews (Flick, 2009) following an interview guide approach (Patton, 2002), which means asking open-ended questions that will give the interviewees the opportunity to talk freely of the experiences that I am looking for (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Semi-structured interviews allow for more flexibility while they involve having a set of guiding questions (theory-driven or confrontational questions) depending on how the interview develops (Flick, 2009). However, an interview guide for semi-structured ensures that interviews will follow several topics of interest (Flick, 2009) without having to adhere to a structured set of questions. According to Patton (2002), a limitation of the interview guide approach is that topics of great value or salient topics may be excluded. This is the reason why apart from the topics that I included in the interview guide, at the end of each interview there was an open question in the case that the interviewee wanted to add something that was not covered until that point. As a result, the interview guide approach along with an inductive analysis provide the opportunity to identify also new ways of understanding the topic, challenge interviewee's subjective theories with follow-up questions while this combination enabled me to research closer to the aim of obtaining descriptions of the interviewees' world and how they interpret their experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015) in regards to ICC.

4.2.1 Selection and criteria of interviewees

Interviewees of this study constitute a mix of in-house communication practitioners, most of them also members of the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD), and crisis communication experts that work as freelancers or as consultants. Having both perspectives from in-house communicators that work for several years in the same organization but also from consultants that being called to "come and rescue" the situation, it uncovers dynamics that are crucially dealing with a crisis. I applied the purposeful sampling technique (Patton, 2002) to identify information-rich interviewees who will illuminate the ways employees are involved in internal crisis communication practices. I followed two different strategies. First of all, I published a short article (see appendix) in the EACD's blog which enabled me to use in the recruitment process of the interviewees. The EACD's Managing Director identified four members that had relevant experience and met the criteria to participate in the current project while a series of posts on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, as well as email communication and direct communication via LinkedIn accounts helped me to identify the rest of communications practitioners needed to conduct the current

study. The criteria for the selection of the interviewees were: communication practitioners with managerial responsibilities, working in a multinational company having at least five years of experience in regards to in-house communications, whilst the criteria for the crisis communication experts are the same, but in this case, they work in consultancies or as freelancers. Before and after each interview I searched for every person on LinkedIn to double-check if their profiles met my requirements, plus I connected with all of them and sent them a thank you message in order to create a less strict relationship as researcher and interviewee.

My purpose was to get a better understanding of the structures that were in place in these multinationals. I expected that all of the in-house communicators would be based in the headquarters offices across Europe. The organizations can be European or not European, but in case that they are not European, they operate in various countries across Europe which makes them multinationals. There are only a few exceptions, however, from some in-house practitioners and consultants being based outside of Europe. Nevertheless, the practices in multinationals, I argue, face the same challenges either in Europe or outside of Europe. The aim is to interview communication practitioners that work in multinationals and then try to synthesize their experiences with the high-reliability organizations theory (HROT) (Roberts, 1990) as a way to move forward in the volatile times that we live nowadays. Some of the communicators that I interviewed work for high-reliability organizations but not all of them though. Here, I would like to emphasize that personally I believe that in every industry there are certain types of risks and special situations and HROs has provided us with a great amount of knowledge on how organizations can be mindful and resilient. This does not mean that the high-reliability organizations theory (HROT) is a panacea. Being a supporter of the contingency theory means, I support that research in HROs needs adaptation and continuous scrutiny in the context of every organization. This is something that I will discuss further in the following chapters.

Previous research in ICC is based in local contexts like Italy (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015), Denmark (Ravazzani, 2016) or Sweden (Falkheimer and Heide). The current project aims to get the perspective among communication practitioners who work for multinationals, and they are based in different countries. It will be quite interesting to find possible patterns across industries given the fact that I search for practices of different types organizations. A potential limitation here is that I interviewed only the communication practitioners and someone could

argue that they can polish things whilst getting the employees' perspective may uncover a different reality. I would suggest that this can be a future research project to conduct case studies inside the same organization both from communications people but also from employees.

4.3 Interview proceedings

As I mentioned earlier an interview guide (see appendix) was created as a first step (Patton, 2002; Kvale & Brinkman, 2015). This interview guide was tested and modified after two interviews with communication practitioners that are not included in the 15 ones consisting the empirical material. The interview guide included four areas of interest, and the purpose was to gather data-rich descriptions through the experiences of communication practitioners across different industries in order to understand how ICC is being practiced. Based on the literature review and previous research, the four areas discussed were: crisis communication, internal crisis communication, the impact of organizational culture on employee engagement and communication in multinationals. These were the four topics on which I listed various questions and in every interview, I followed this structure but not necessarily the exact phrasing of questions. Every interview started with a few demographic questions to 'break the ice' in regards to educational background, and more particularly studies related to crisis communication as well as questions about the organization that they work for. Having explorative and semi-structured interviews (Flick, 2009; Kvale & Brinkman, 2015), I tried to create a comfortable environment trying to remain fairly conversational and situational (Patton, 2002). I tried to follow the interview guide, however, whenever the interviewee had something special to contribute I tried to follow the interviewee's experience thanks to the flexibility of the semi-structured interviews (Flick, 2009). Based on the interviewees' contributions, I could pick the most related questions and dig into various aspects. That also created a comfortable atmosphere where the communicators could share their experiences freely and without hesitation.

The communication with all the interviewees was digital through emails or LinkedIn messages. In total, 14 interviews were conducted within five weeks, 12 of which were with in-house communicators and 2 with crisis communications experts who work as freelancers. One more crisis communication expert was willing to help me in this process of collecting empirical material, but due to limited time, he requested to be sent the interview guide and

replied via email a couple of days later. I know that this is not considered an interview but his contributions were quite valuable, and this is the reason why I included his answers in the empirical material. All interviews lasted from 36 up to 56 minutes depending on the availability of each communication practitioner. I had the chance to interview people from 11 organizations based in 10 different countries. Skype was the main tool due to limited resources to conduct the interviews as the interviewees were located in different cities mainly across Europe, but also outside Europe. Skype as a tool is preferable due to the convenience that offers, where based on interviewees' needs we use audio and in some cases audio and video so we could see each other (Seitz, 2015) and create a better connection as a research investigator and an interviewee. Skype is a cost-effective solution but also provides a certain level of comfort to participants. Nevertheless, due to confidentiality regulations from some organizations, I also conducted three phone interviews whilst I did one interview via Google Hangouts, one via BlueJeans Network and one via Zoom; all of them are digital tools similar to Skype. Either via Skype or the phone calls, I tried to manage any concerns about asymmetry power (Kvale & Brinkman, 2015). All of them were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviewees received the transcripts, and they had the chance to correct any factual errors or to double check that everything being said in the interview was correct. Indeed, they sent back to me the transcripts either with no changes or with minor changes without significant changes in the text.

Last but not least, every interview started with a disclaimer (see appendix). After reading the disclaimer, every interviewee stated that they approve a series of statements mentioned in the disclaimer about the recording, the transcript, and actions that I took in order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Anonymity was one of the most significant concerns for the interviewees, and I explained to them that I would not mention the name of the interviewee, neither the name of the organization nor the industry that they operate in. One of them actually asked me to send the disclaimer before the interview in order to participate. The above, ensured anonymity as I made clear that no information that could identify the identity of every interviewee will be published, but also created a more trustworthy relationship between me as the interviewer and the interviewee. As it was mentioned in the disclaimer, the recordings were kept only by me whilst access to the anonymized transcripts was given to my supervisor and other academic colleagues with whom I might collaborate as part of the research process.

4.4 Analytical process

An inductive approach was used to develop a coding scheme which is the first step of the analysis (Patton, 2002). More specifically, following an inductive approach, I went through my empirical material in order to discover patterns, themes, and categories (Patton, 2002). The inductive qualitative analysis is a non-quantitative strategy (Ryan and Bernard, 2000) where findings emerge through the interaction of the researcher with the empirical material which in this case was the transcripts.

Shortly after every interview took place, I transcribed each interview in order to make it easier for the analytical process. All interviews were conducted within five weeks with small breaks in-between. A few interviews were postponed or even interrupted due to the nature crisis communicators' job. As it became clear earlier, these people deal with unexpected and unpredictable events. As a result, due to this kind of events, we had to postpone a couple of interviews, and one was interrupted. This is the reason why I planned from the beginning a two-week buffering time in case unpredictable events take place. As soon as I had a meaningful amount of transcripts ready, I went through them in order to identify preliminary patterns. That helped me to create the initial coding themes (Patton, 2002). However, once all the interviews were conducted, then a new reading through all the empirical material enabled me to develop more formal coding. It is a process of going back and forth, and it reminded me the legend of Ariadne with the clue through the labyrinth, however, in this case, the labyrinth was the transcripts. In the end, the codebook was a result of the interview guide themes, the theory, and the purpose of the current study. I created five different themes, which are the five sections of the following chapter. I am aware that I was the only coder and the fact that a second person could enhance this process. However, I tried to have some gaps between my reading in order to refresh my mind and challenge my own thinking.

With regards to convergence (Patton, 2002) and by figuring out what fits together I noticed that there are different levels of maturity across these organizations; from organizations which have well-optimized structures and systems in place, to organizations that have specific practices in place without being as mindful as the others comparatively, but with potential to be in case of implementing a series of things that I will discuss later on in the analysis part. All these organizations share a series of similarities as practices or structures, and there are apparent differences that made easier to find patterns.

Given that this study has adopted a social constructionist perspective, the analysis is constructed by me based on the empirical material coming from the experiences of communication practitioners. It is “a process of verifying theories or prepositions” (Patton, 20012), with qualitative data. This data is the outcome of my interaction between me, as the researcher investigator, and the interviewees. Analytical induction enabled me to understand how communication practitioners engage with their employees as internal crisis communication practices in the real world (i.e., town-hall meetings) or through the intranet of internal social media platforms for instance. As Patton (2002) argues using analytic induction, the aim is not to discover universal causal generalizations. Instead, the purpose of this study is to understand how multinationals practice internal crisis communication in order to engage with their employees. Further, direct quotes or summary context from the transcripts are presented in the analysis part to illustrate my arguments.

To sum up, this chapter was a representation of my research method and my strategy on how to collect the empirical material, but also how I analyzed this qualitative data. Now, I will elaborate more on the findings.

5. Analysis

What follows here is the analysis of how multinationals use internal crisis communication and the ways that they engage with their employees before, during and after a crisis takes place. According to communication professionals, multinationals engage with their employees in various ways online and offline. However, I will start with a reflection on defining crisis because I believe that the way an organization defines crisis has clear implications in the ways that the organization engage with its internal stakeholders. After that, I will continue by presenting communication practitioners' view about the impact of organization culture on internal crisis communication. An interesting finding here is that organizational culture is a dynamic concept given that culture is a guiding element for organizational life and employee engagement. In the third section, different channels and practices will provide a better understanding of how communication practitioners utilize internal crisis communication, while the fourth theme will be about preparedness. Internal crisis communication and diverse workforce follows, and, in the end, I will close this chapter with a few findings and reflections moving forward. The entire above are relevant to the maturity of each organization as I mentioned earlier.

5.1 Defining crisis

To begin with, it is crucial to understand how multinationals conceptualize crisis to get a better understanding of how they utilize ICC strategies and therefore how they engage with their employees (Frandsen and Johansen, 2017). All MNCs participated in my research have their own definitions of what crises mean to them. Most organizations though have separate definition for crisis management and issues management. According to one of the organizations for instance

crises are certain events which involve potential or actual loss of life or several injuries to employees or external stakeholders affected by [organization's] operations

whereas,

an issue is a controversy with one or more stakeholders regarding an [organization's] position or practice with a potential to impact the companies' earnings, activities or reputation.

According to communication professionals' view this division between issues management and crisis management has been quite helpful and efficient for them. It was interesting though to find that in one organization, issues management is handled by different people than the ones who handle crisis management. This is quite important having in mind that '*crisis is not a well-managed issue*' meaning that in case that an issue becomes a crisis, briefing new people can cost considerable time for an organization without taking into consideration other resources needed. And here comes the big question '*at what point does an issue turn into a crisis*'. The answer to this question from some organizations is that they "*have an escalation system with colors*" in place in order to handle issues and crisis and their progress. On the other hand, there are multinationals that are even reluctant of using the word crisis in their corporate vocabulary. They try to avoid it as much as they can, and they adopt other terms instead ('*it doesn't exist in our corporate vocabulary*'). More particularly, there are cases that they do not even call these events as crises but as '*special situations*' and they have in place business continuity plans as they call them and not crisis management strategies for the post-crisis period. As a result, there is a clear fear of not escalating an issue to a crisis in multinationals.

Defining crisis as a concept is the first step to handle it. The way that an organization defines crisis or what events are perceived as a crisis, reflects the maturity of the organization itself (Jaques, 2009). From my interviews, I concluded that there are different levels of maturity among the multinationals from which I had the chance to interview communication professionals. Starting with organizations that are well-optimized in all aspects on one end of the spectrum, on the other there are organizations which are not that developed regarding ICC in particular aspects. For instance, a way to make this escalation can be the crisis definitions. More complex definitions form a group of mature and sophisticated organizations. These or-

ganizations address employees even in their own definition of crisis. An example of these definitions is the following:

An unexpected and unpredictable product, facility or employee related event or set of circumstances that exposes, or has the likely potential to expose:

- *consumers, employees or other individuals to injury, loss, harm or damage*
- *entities or the environment to loss or damage*
- *the company, its employees, products, tangible or intangible assets to legal or regulatory liability, severe adverse publicity, sustainable negative public opinion or damage to the reputation of the company*
- *the company's business operations to severe disruption*

On the contrary, there are organizations which are quite reluctant of creating complex definitions in the name of simplicity. They believe that a simpler definition is an easily understood definition. According to communicators working in less mature organizations, crisis *'could be an incident or it could be another occasion that basically has the potential to damage the reputation of the company'*. It becomes evident that this definition is quite broad and reflects the organizational approach of handling crisis which seems to be on-the-spot - at least in certain occasions - without addressing employees. The following quote summarizes my thoughts about less sophisticated multinationals.

I would say that it's like putting your head into the sand and hoping that the storm will pass by. So, I think that's happening a lot and I think it's a missed opportunity to enhance or to foster trust, openness and communications in general in the company and learn about the employees and value the employees' opinion.

Another surprising finding was that the phrase *'it depends'* was used by all communication professionals in every single interview. Every communication practitioner used the phrase *'it depends'* at some point as if internal crisis communication is subject of the type or locus of a crisis. According to the contingency theory of accommodation the type or the locus of a crisis shape the response to the crisis (Pang, Jin, and Cameron, 2010) it does not dictate whether organizations in general should engage and communicate with their employees. Whatever happens to the organization automatically has an impact to the employees. As a result, it should not be a question whether we communicate or not to our employees because employ-

ees will always value to get the information internally and not from an external source. The decision to share or not information with employees might have critical consequences in trust relationships between the organization and its people. As one of the communication practitioners put it:

To me this is respecting your employees, providing information equals respecting and trusting your employees. Sometimes and actually most of the times you see that we do value media, and probably political stakeholders, we do value them more because they get information earlier than we share it with our own employees...employees need to know at least the same time as external stakeholders do... I don't want employees to read company news from the newspaper, good or bad, without being informed or knowing something before or at least the same time.

Nevertheless, communication professionals acknowledge the fact that this is a struggle; it is a struggle to keep up with the needs of the internal audiences. Given that multinationals are in stock market they are bound to inform their shareholders first for whatever happens, and then all the rest of the stakeholders. Even in case of the fire while everyone in the building knows that the building is on fire the company must inform its shareholders first before sharing any kind of information internally. That was an example described by a communication professional during one of the interview to illustrate the current status of internal crisis communication. And that example brings to the surface one dysfunctionality of the present processes. Most of the interviewees raise their concerns regarding the current decision-making processes and approval systems because nowadays both do not cope with the speed that news travels.

[Multinationals] are slower, because you need to have more people aligned. Of course, you would get a better message out there whenever everyone is aligned but that can take some time and sometimes especially in the crisis speed of essence, so I think that that's the real difficulty to be quick.

5.2 The impact of organizational culture

One of the key aspects of organizational culture is how information and knowledge are shared within the organization (Al Shamsi and Ajmal, 2018). When I asked the communicators about the impact of the organizational culture in ICC, I got various responses. But let me first pre-

sent the fact that multinationals seem to have quite strong organizational culture according to the interviewees, and more specifically as one of them put it a '*cohesive organizational culture*'. Communication practitioners emphasized the importance of creating an environment of trust, respect and openness where transparent communication is the main principle. Additionally, one of them mentioned that it is crucial to communicate to your employees the fact that you are preparing for this possibility; it is part of the organizational life that you need to prove to your internal stakeholders that the organization can go through turbulent times and remain stable.

Communicate this to your employees, show to your employees, yes there is always an opportunity that a crisis might hit us although we do our best to avoiding it

I think that a crisis first of all is a way to prove in the public that the company and the organization are stable and able to go through difficult situations and not fall into full chaos.

By communicating the above, an organization enhances further the trust relationship between an employee and the organization during normal times, and well nurtured relationships before a crisis have substantial effect of employees' stance during a crisis (Van der Meer et al., 2017). This also shows the maturity of an organization that sees crisis as an opportunity by investing in front in order to be able to make sure that the lesson will be learnt when the crisis is over.

Another finding regarding organizational culture was that a strong organizational culture is a necessity for multinationals according to communication practitioners' view ('*if they have a strong company culture that will help them to succeed*'). This is mainly since multinationals usually acquire companies which might have different culture. And this is a practice that MNCs usually adopt to grow by acquiring companies.

if you're constantly acquiring things and integrating them into your business you have to keep repeating what this is who we are, this is what we stand for; this is the culture of our organization. So, I think in that new organizations and organizations which constantly go through...they tend to have a clear sense of what

their corporate culture should be, and they communicate that more regularly and frequently in their organization and therefore it tends to actually stay and work.

As the quote above displays, organizational culture needs to be communicated constantly because of the acquisitions or the organizational changes. Employees need to be reminded of why they are there, and communicators need to send a signal to internal stakeholders that they are not there only for the service that they provide, but because they can contribute to the success and growth of the organization in multiple ways. All the above enable and empower employees to be committed and willing to go the extra mile even during turbulent times. As a result, organizational life has clear impact on employee engagement not only during crisis but also during normal times.

Most of the communicators realized that organizational culture is a dynamic concept and that it can be a great asset for an organization during a crisis (*'there is a number of values and elements in our culture that I would say really talks in favor of strong focused communication in a crisis situation'*). They do not forget though that a strong organizational culture comes with some limitations, it can be an obstacle or even the root cause of a crisis. For instance, it was quite striking to hear from a communication practitioner that due to the conservative nature of the industry that they operate, their organizational culture is also conservative and internal stakeholders were not used to ask for more information. Indeed, I can understand that an organization might *'operate in a conservative industry'*, however, this is not an argument for not engaging with your employees before, during or after a crisis. In other words, as the world is changing, the organization itself needs to change and adapt to the new circumstances. Something that could guarantee success in the past, it cannot do the same nowadays. Mindful communicators grasp the opportunities for change even by creating an artificial before and after (*'you need to create a before and an after and a crisis can help you'*). Organizational culture together with leadership and continuous learning is considered the cornerstone of sustaining and enhancing high reliability (Schulz et al., 2017). If an organization fails to understand the need for change then it will be forced to face the consequences. One of these consequences might be also a crisis. A communication professional shared with me one of his experiences where the organization was under a severe crisis and after an internal audit they came to the conclusion that one of the root-causes was actually the organizational culture itself. The next quote illustrates this experience:

So, by many different actions we came across as an organization that it didn't care about people, we only cared about ourselves... and you can say that it was the fact that our culture was wrong. That kind of notion created the problem because our culture was not customer-focused enough.

The leadership of this organization failed to identify the root cause of a crisis from the beginning. Another cost of the crisis for an organization can be losing talent (*'you could see people leaving the company and especially those who were very faithful'*). Continuous learning and scrutinizing the organizational culture could have prevented the organization from this crisis or at least the organization would have been confronted with less negative outcomes. Adding to the above, the same communication practitioner mentioned the difficulty that he was prompted with in terms of organizational change, I quote here what the interviewee said:

[the organization] has been always characterized by having a lot of employee pride. And we normally talk about it as a good thing, and it's a great thing. There is a lot of great stuff coming from the fact that people feel proud of their workplace but there is also a downside. Pride of means that people don't understand why they need to change. If you're too proud, you don't change.

Being mindful and resilient needs to be exercised inside the organization and eventually will become part of the culture. This is clearly an aspect of the culture that shapes the organizational life, the communication inside the organization and therefore the employee engagement. Organizations who make the difference are the ones who empower employees to adopt a more risk willing attitude and think outside of the box. One interviewee shared an experience in a workshop about being creative and innovative by thinking outside of the box. However, when a person in the group came up with an idea like this, then the reaction was that *'this is not us'* and my interviewee mentioned that left the workshop with the impression that you can *'be creative and crazy, but only within the box'*. If organizations want to drive change, then senior leadership needs to practice what they preach for in terms of organizational change otherwise the atmosphere in the organization will be like *'of course people want to take risks and be bold but only when it succeeds'*. Employees need to be empowered and therefore engaged employees who want to improve the organization look for weaknesses instead of looking for a comfort blanket (Mansfield-Devine, 2017). On the contrary, *'being ig-*

norant’ is a recipe for failure as a communicator said. Finally, one communication professional said, regarding the organizational culture, that it,

was quite smart at boiling down to very basic values... and they are probably the common denominator in a company.

In the end of this section I will close with a quote which I believe summarizes the other side of the coin when it comes to organizational culture. *‘If only one person is to be accountable for a mistake, then something is wrong with the organizational culture’*. Now, I will move on to the next section presenting the internal channels and the practices multinationals have developed.

5.3 Internal channels

My interviews enable me to understand what types of internal channels are in place and in what ways do MNCs address employees by utilizing the available technology during all phases of a crisis. Here, I argue that one of the things that multinationals are really good at is the structures that they have in place. Given that they have thousands of employees across various regions, multiple internal channels make possible to communicate effectively to all internal stakeholders regardless of position, hierarchy, or cultural background. *‘The only thing that holds true is that you need to be quick because news travels fast’*.

5.3.1 Intranet

All multinationals utilize the available internal channels regarding ICC. To begin with, multinationals have an Intranet platform which works as an encyclopedia (*‘it’s the main carrier of information use’*), where employees can find everything about the organization, from the history and the company’s culture, to templates and standardized processes just to name a few. Communication professionals point out the importance of providing information on time on company’s Intranet because,

This is very bad if the employees have to get the information from outside sources if they cannot go to the company intranet and find information which is directly addressed to them, so they have to learn about the situation from press or social media... that is definitely creating a lot of lack of trust

Multinationals try to update regularly their Intranet platforms to integrate new features that will enable interaction with the employees, so it is not only sharing one-way information. Lately some of the multinationals mentioned that they introduced an internal news hub where employees can find relevant information. These platforms provide the opportunity to have separate pages for each region in which local communicators can upload information that is relevant, and it is in the local language (*'global portal and then regional and country-based pages beneath it'*). Plus, other features of these interactive platforms are features that we know from social media (Like, Share, Follow, and Comment) or even giving the opportunity to employees to share their own stories. Moreover, in an attempt to internalize external information inside the organization, communicators use these platforms to share stories that are written from media and employees should be aware during time of crises. The borders between what is external and internal nowadays are blurring, *'what you say internally can be said or heard externally and vice versa'*. As a result, Intranet and internal news platforms are platforms that are used during all phases of a crisis for different objectives.

5.3.2 Emails

Communication professionals are aware that not all employees are quite familiar with the company's Intranet and this is the reason why emails are used carefully (*'was mainly handled by emails'*) to share top level information with links to Intranet. By clicking on these, employees are directed to pages on the Intranet where they can find all the information available and then they can engage with it.

What we would normally do is we will send out an email with some basic information, but the core information would be on Intranet and there is a reason for that because I want to capture readership.

Sending emails is the most effective internal channel that exists until now according to communicators. Besides tracking numbers of employee engagement as an indicator of what is at stake for employees, emails can be used to spread information in case of an emergency. Usually emails will be sent out from a central function (Corporate Communications) to local managers or leaders and then they (local communicators or managers) will decide by themselves how to use this information locally moving forward. There are email groups which are dynamically updated. It is quite rare that an all-employee email will be sent out. Emails are

used as an effective communication channel alongside Intranet. However, there are regions where employees are more familiar with the intranet and others where emails are more effective; this is the reason why during a crisis all available channels are used to maximize integration of information to all internal audiences. Then employees can engage with the information provided based on their needs. A strategic communicator needs to take into consideration all the available channels, their characteristics and their audience in crafting a message.

You know you cannot use the same tone of voice when you are in the social media, when you talk to journalists or when you talk to internal stakeholders or whereas if you talk to politicians for example in that sense.

I will add here also the way you talk in a town-hall meeting cannot be the same with the way that a manager or a communicator will address a topic in an email; communicators treat content differently based on the channel, but the message stays the same.

5.3.3. Internal Social Media

In addition, communication professionals are aware of *‘the gap between how people absorb and seek out information when they are not working and how we communicate to employees when they're working is just growing and growing and growing’*. Organizations have been investing a lot in employee engagement, however, it seems that the numbers across the world do not increase as they would expect; this is the so-called employee engagement crisis (Mann and Harter, 2016). In order to tackle this problem, multinationals have implemented, or they are in the phase of implementing right now internal social media platforms. Internal Social Media (ISM) or Enterprise Social Media is a web-based and user-friendly (reached from PC and mobile devices) communication platform where coworkers and managers have the ability to *‘communicate, interact, connect, and make sense of their work and organizational life’* (Madsen, 2016). Mature organizations have already implemented those types of platforms promoting strategically collaboration between employees and fostering employee engagement. The study conducted by Haddud et al. (2016) showed that a workforce is more empowered by using ISM-because employees can express their concerns, raise their questions and get answers without feeling intimidated. It feels different to ask questions *‘even if your name is attached to the comment it feels a lot less intrusive to ask a question’*. At the same time, ISM enhance transparency and participation - active or passive - (Haddud, Dugger and Gill, 2016). However, introducing ISM in an organization means that there are challenges

which follow, and communicators should be aware of them. Surprisingly enough none of the interviewees addressed those challenges during the interviews. According to Madsen (2016) there are four challenges which are:

- “coworkers could perceive communication on ISM as not work related
- coworkers might not understand the informal nature of communication on ISM, and self-censorship might stop them communicating on ISM
- ISM was not considered a “natural” part of the daily routines in the organizations
- top managers mainly supported ISM in words, not in action”

It becomes evident here, that apart from trust, respect, open and honest communication, communicators have a critical role to integrate ISM into the organizational life and empower employees and managers to become familiar using such platforms before a crisis hits. ISM is a great opportunity for multinationals and can bridge the gap between the ways that employees nowadays communicate or seek out for information in and outside of work. The Intranet, news platforms and ISM can connect all the employees across the globe regardless of hierarchy, position, culture etc. As a communicator put it *‘I think that this is the most prompt way that we would be able to get out to employees and not just inform them but also provide them a space for them to comment and ask questions if such situations could be emerged’*. Harmonizing though all the aforementioned systems is crucial, it should be rather simple for employees to use these platforms otherwise they will be proved useless.

5.3.4 Global communicators’ network

Another structure that multinationals have in place and its importance is extremely increasing is an internal global network of communicators. MNCs hire communicators that combine both experience and business understanding (*‘you don’t hire your secretary or your assistance to do communications’*). Most of communicators that I interviewed confirmed the existence of an internal network which connects all communicators across the countries that the organization operates. This network makes sure that regions are not left alone to communicate.

People that work with communication either fulltime based or part-time based around the world... so we have people who have at least as part of

their job communication as a responsibility, mostly that would be internal but in some cases external communicators and in parallel with the communication to and with local management then we would also communicate to the local communicators providing instructions for them as to how to organize potentially town-hall meetings, how to look at emerging concerns and questions among employees but also obviously how to address and mitigate external requests.

This network provides the opportunity to share best practice or align among all communicators. The members of this network are the local ears and eyes, they are the people on the ground and can collect concerns or questions coming from employees, then address them to the headquarter offices in order to make sure that there is a link between the operations and the global functions. One of high reliability theory's principles is to stay close to operations (Schulz, Geithner, and Mistele, 2017), in this case this can be translated as stay close to your local communicators.

I know that this is a challenge but at the same time if you have qualified people locally, I would suggest that you should leave it to them because otherwise you're kind of a big brother trying to control the world which is inefficient and also probably ineffective.

A network like this makes sure that there is a two-way internal communication flow where communication comes from the top (global functions), from the bottom (regional or local offices) but also takes place horizontally as well. By horizontally I mean that communicators can interact with other colleagues as well; local communicators can engage with other local communicators who might have faced the same issue or crisis in the past to share best practice. Once per year all members of this internal network of communicators meet physically to discuss and develop further the existing strategies. They acknowledge the fact that meeting physically once per year is not enough. Technology helps them to maximize such a network. There are regular meetings (weekly or monthly) to ensure that there is a continuous connection via webinars, Skype calls or even phone calls (planned or ad hoc). During those meetings they have the opportunity to co-create messages or to shape strategies; this is how the central functions empower local communicators and remind them of the importance to provide information on time and facilitate dialogue online and off-line. This will enable the organization to

know what is happening everywhere. It is a quite decentralized approach that enables local offices to take more ownership and proactively prevent any misunderstanding. In other words, such a network communicators exercise readiness because *‘they are the ones to call first especially in the regions outside of the headquarters’*.

5.3.5. Other channels

Most of communicators emphasized the importance of having in place various channels in case that one of them fails or technology betrays them. Depending on the maturity level of the organization, they have various types of internal channels.

In terms of infrastructure I would recommend to make sure that you have in place at least 4 to 5 different channels alongside each other. If one brakes, you can at least use other ones.

I think that in terms of managing it's wise to have various systems in place, so if one system fails down at least you can have the option of using the others.

This quote comes from a communication practioners working in a well-optimized organization. So apart from Intranet, emails, internal social media, an internal global communicators network, some organizations additionally maintain PA systems, use WhatsApp groups (*‘Yes we use group in WhatsApp’*), introduce satellite systems which work independently of the IT system (*‘we also have a satellite phone system in place in case that our IT system fails and we have to use an outside system which is independently of the normal IT network, independent of the normal mobile phone network’*), or keep offline phonebooks (*‘we have a phone book with all the key functions which is printed’*) so in case that there is a cyber attack and their IT system is down, they can continue to operate and also mitigate the crisis. Digital signage is also used given the opportunity to provide customized messages in short time. Finally, printed communication is also used especially in common areas. Printed communication has worked pretty well in order to grab the attention of the employees. Printed communication is static communication and that’s why multinationals *‘have the opportunity to create and distribute video messages very quickly’* either via SMS or via email.

5.3.6. Offline communication

Offline communication is also very crucial. By mobilizing local management offline communication in the form of town-hall meetings, weekly team meetings or even off-site meetings is open and transparent. Communicators get a better understanding of employee concerns with all these social interactions, and then they can build on to further shape the communication strategy. Cases where *'the questions they answered at the town-hall meeting, they were selected, and the messaging was very prepared so there was hardly any spontaneous communications around that event'* do not build trust between the organization and its employees, a much-needed ingredient during crisis times. Leaders should be able to answer questions and practice what they preach for. *'The top management and middle management should be really authentic'*, which means that rather than bringing consultants they should face themselves questions and concerns coming from employees.

Because people know that the consultants they cost a lot of money so they said "well they could have kept at least one person with the price of the consultants" and then they didn't create any direct dialogue with the management and again I don't know if they got the feedback from them [employees] or at least it was not the direct feedback, the emotional feedback and the first really first reaction....they [consultants] were the filter.

In addition, MNCs have the technology need to facilitate a global town-hall meeting. It is physically impossible that all employees can come together to make sense of a situation. In this case a town-hall will be held in the headquarters and via live stream all employees across the globe can watch it live. Just because *'news travels fast'*, usually an email comes first followed by a town-hall meeting. The tendency is that leaders would host locally town-halls and then get back to the head offices with the concerns of the employees. It is a more personalized way to share what has happened internally and provide the opportunity to employees to share their concerns and questions. If they are not able to provide all the needed information, they can always contact the corporate communications for support.

I think if you don't let people be part of that change experience and have their say... if you don't let people to have their say and let them experience and be able to express in a town hall meeting what they feel about the intranet - the web page –

then [employees] will not become involved in it, then they won't become part of that change process

All the above channels provide internal stakeholders with arguments, facts and talking points that they can use as an ambassador or a person with a balanced view. As one of the communicators said:

To have a balanced view about an organization means that I could argue, or I could defend if I need to, but I am also very open and free to share what I don't like, and I know that my opinion counts. And to me that is trustful and credible communication. And what we do in our internal communications, we try to do exactly that; go for credible communications and how do you do that, we don't put things under the carpet and hope employees won't realise.

This means that when employees get questions from their families, friends and in general the outside world, they should be able to answer. Another interviewee mentioned clearly why an organization should engage with its employees,

Employees can also be part of the solution sometimes. You can use them also if your company is in trouble for some reason, to get them behind you and agree to certain messages.

In the end, we should not forget that it about work, it is not a religion as a Head of Communication pointed out.

5.4 “Be prepared is better than be shocked”

I think that the most important is to have your process in place. So, you don't start thinking about what to do once the issue emerges. So that you are prepared, and you know how your taskforce should look like, so you call the right people with the right competences. Because then you can start working right away... mitigating.

...having the right set up from the start so you're very quick, so people are familiar with the roles and very quickly you're ready to actually handle the crisis and not spend any unnecessary time setting your team, getting familiar with the situation, and briefings to people...

Communication professionals made clear how important is to have your strategies in place and be prepared. One of them emphasized particularly the importance of communicators to be part of this process using the following metaphor; *'if you compare it to an orchestra, don't be the violin player but be the contractor'*. This is how critical is for communicators to be part of these processes because even if *'we are not subject matter experts on the crisis itself, we raise kind of questions that experts never raise'*. Being prepared, have regular exercises and expect the crisis is the approach of the most mature organizations which invest a considerable amount of resources to that.

5.4.1 Crisis response team

Having your system in place, means that there is a crisis response team. During the last years, there is a shift from hiring a crisis communication agency towards a crisis response team inside in the organization. Members of this team is the executive management or senior leadership (C-suite) representing all functions (Finance, Legal, HR, Communication, IT). The crisis response team meets regularly for training - I will elaborate on that aspect later -, and it makes a big difference that all members are present at the simulations or exercises.

People saying yeah, I'm on duty but I don't have time now and, in the beginning, people said, "Okay then we will just miss you". And then at a moment the leadership said "No a crisis is a crisis, you have to be there period. You are on duty, you have to come". And that changed a lot.

Trainings need to be taken seriously not only as preparedness but also as an opportunity to rehearse. It is important that all members of a crisis response team know each other in advance, spend time together and work as if a crisis occurs. If the members are familiar among them before a crisis takes place, unpredictable factors will be limited (*'they can practice what that's like, and they can work with each other, so they can understand each other'*). Coming to practicalities, there are some organizations that have an app (a crisis app) available on their

app store. So apart from the printed manual in front of them, each member has the crisis app in the cellphone with all tasks and responsibilities, contact details and other useful information in a more user-friendly way (*'when you have a crisis no one is going to sit down and read the manual, that's for sure'*). The printed version is always there though as a back-up plan in any case. The principle is not to make very detailed strategies (*'we try to protect ourselves from making it too detailed'*) and leave room for improvisation as well (Falkheimer and Heide, 2010). On the contrary, high reliability theory suggests reluctance towards oversimplification as one of the main principles (Lekka, 2011).

5.4.2 Local crisis response teams

More sophisticated organisations have introduced local crisis teams especially in key markets. They *'always try to localize and that is what you need to think of dealing with a crisis in a decentralized organization'*, ownership is passed to local management always with the support from the headquarters. *'We have a consulting role here in the headquarters'*, this is what a Head of Communication said as a response to one of my questions about his role. The objective is to be close to the ones affected from a crisis, understand the cultural norms, and a local crisis response team is consisted of people on the ground. These teams are mainly activated on local crises, if there is a global crisis then the crisis response team in the headquarters will handle the situation.

5.4.3 Trainings

Here, I would argue that multinationals seem to be preoccupied with fear instead of failure. Preoccupation with failure is one the principles of high reliability theory (Tamuz and Harrison, 2006). This is a clear difference between HROs and MNCs and creates a completely different situation where mistakes are more likely to happen during times of uncertainty. One could argue that just because of fear everyone can make mistakes. Adding to that the control-obsession from headquarters and central functions, one could argue that mistakes are not seen as source of learning but as something that can be a reason to lose even your job.

In a multinational organization there is a tighter control in terms of what you can do, but on the other hand, you also get more support.

If someone has done something wrong, we're going to fire him. That's a kind of culture in the company and I don't agree on that because firing people is easy way of doing but you don't deliver any learning... because firing people is throwing away all your learnings, the next person in place he's going to make that exactly same mistake.

According to the high reliability theory mistakes and errors are precluded through experimentation and learning (Schulz, Geithner, and Mistele, 2017). This means that the extensive training that HROs have in place creates space for mistakes, where people have the opportunity to do mistakes during the simulation or training, and then afterwards to discuss about them so when a crisis happens they can avoid doing the same mistakes (Lekka, 2011). On the contrary as a communication professional admits it *'I agree there is a need for training which probably is not done at all to the extent that you should'*. It was observed actually across many interviewees this need for further training. Some of them they admitted that is due to the cost, however, seeing training as a cost reflect the maturity of the organization. One could ask here how an organization can avoid mistakes when it does not provide enough training to its people. There are though some of the multinationals which indeed have extensive training (*'we are having exercises on a monthly basis'*) and they invest resources in front because *'if you have invest in front properly and still the crisis hits you, it's an opportunity to further explore'* new opportunities.

There are two types of trainings; the ones that take place in headquarters for the crisis response team and the trainings for local crisis response team or local offices in general. Starting from the first category of exercise, the crisis response team managers makes sure that everyone is there and that there is a 'crisis room' which is available 24/7 in case of a real crisis or for an exercise, *'because you never know what happens'*. These trainings are most of the times planned, but there might be cases of unplanned or ad hoc exercises. The second category of trainings is the ones organized from the headquarters to local/regional offices. This is an additional opportunity to remind the local management team not to forget the internal stakeholders (*'you cannot forget your employees, they are the ambassadors of the company'*). These trainings are based in tailored scenarios because communication practitioners are aware that *'cultures are different in different countries. And those issues are looked at in different ways in different cultures'*. At the same time, these trainings provide the same consciousness

across all regions. All these simulations prepare the organization on how to face a crisis, but also how to turn a crisis into an opportunity. It is also about preparedness and readiness.

5.4.4 Post crisis

Even though there are various strategies and channels in place for the pre-crisis period as well as the acute phase of the crisis, the post-crisis phase in terms of employee engagement seems to be less planned. Communication professionals, on one hand, acknowledge the fact that the post-crisis period is crucial for the organization however they were quite reluctant to my questions about employee involvement in that phase. Indeed there are debrief and evaluation meetings among the crisis response teams and the top management, in regards to the processes that there are in place, what worked well and what it did not, so they can detect points of improvement for the future, and in some case there are standardized processes in place for that (*'yes after everything because we need to know what happens in one case, and you don't do mistakes twice ideally'*), but in most cases the results are shared with shareholders and the senior leadership.

We have a debrief session and it's standardized, so there is basically a meeting and the crisis incident manager will basically lead the meeting and everyone else will be asked to capture that relevant learnings.

The best scenario is that some of the learning can be featured in the internal news hub or could be a topic of discussion in a town-hall. There are also cases that the results were *'not really shared'*. The critical point though here is that employees are not explicitly addressed in events followings a crisis. According to the plans, they will get some information or some messages and all these are discussed and decided behind closed doors I mean without employee involvement.

If you don't let people to have their say and let them experience and be able to express in a town hall meeting what they feel about the intranet, the web page then will not become involved in it then they won't become part of that change process.

Be honest with your employees and involve them in a change journey, involve them, tell them what's going on and if you do that, you will have a strong work-

force and a happy workforce. It's just simple as that and it's happening even more and that I think is really good.

The two above quotes emphasized the importance of engaging with the employees as well after a crisis. These words though were not followed by concrete plans or strategies. As one of the communicators said, *'the post-crisis is also the moment you have to think about opportunity'*. More mature organizations record everything that happens in the *'crisis room'* with cameras and microphones so they can scrutinize everything when the crisis is over. This is the only way to integrate the accumulated knowledge of the organization from handling a crisis and improve the organization moving forward.

When it comes to post crisis I believe that it is not enough to think about opportunity when a crisis is over, you need to make sure even from the pre-crisis phase you have created the circumstances inside the organization and there are solicit processes in place to explore opportunities after a crisis. Moreover, the lack of training together with the reluctance of engaging with employees after a crisis, make me quite critical on how these organizations can strengthen their setup and improve their strategies to avoid misunderstandings or potential negative outcomes. It has become evident that multinationals have been working really hard to introduce ICC, but there are a lot of things that need to happen in order to meet the needs of the internal audiences. Last but not least, post-crisis practices need further development by engaging more with employees; these are the ones who will drive the change in the end. If they are not onboard, then your job will be quite challenging. I will close this section with a quote coming from communication professional that experienced a crisis where employees were part of the solution, and explicitly shows how much they can contribute to the organization before, during and after a crisis,

They were really able to contribute with very valuable insights, ideas, projects and responses to the situation...

5.5 ICC and diverse workforce

By nature, multinationals have a quite diverse workforce given that they operate in various countries. A diverse workforce according to high reliability theory enables organizations to see more opportunities as well as to do more complex things (Schulz, Geithner, and Mistele,

2017). All multinationals participating in this project have English as a corporate language. Nevertheless, most of them understand that even if they adopt English as a lingua franca, this does not automatically solve every problem. The help of the local communicators is valuable here. They are the ones who can translate and adapt to the local languages the messages created from or co-created with headquarters, or if they cannot do it by themselves they have the resources to hire an external agency. One of the main struggles though during a crisis is that there is not enough time to adapt to cultural sensitivity

Which means that the messages will be short, and it requires first to have it translated literally in the local languages, there won't be a lot of time to create a kind of cultural sensitivity to it. That's going to be a challenge.

This burden therefore goes to the shoulders of local management and local communicators. The perfectly defined messages in English from the headquarters create problems, on one hand, to local communicators,

press releases coming from the head office in English...you can have sentences that are very carefully formulated but are super hard to translate

and, on the other hand, in corporate communications itself because as soon as they create a press release, this text needs to be approved and then translated to local languages, and sometimes by the time they translate it to the local languages, this press release is already useless because a new one is ready in English.

it took a while until news came up, and at some point, of time but there was already a new version when we finished the previous one in the first two days because we have such a high speed of developing messages

During a crisis, events take place very fast ('how fast information goes nowadays, how fast is circulated and shared so it's almost immediate'), for organizations it is a struggle to be quick, provide messages on time to their internal stakeholders not only in English but also in local languages and be the owner of the information. As I mentioned earlier translation agencies can be of a help here. However, as one of the interviewees said:

I actually try to avoid translation agencies as much as possible because language is not just about translation it's also about knowing the whole context and especially in terms of issues and crises it's super important to really get the right formulations and the translation agency do not know the whole background or know what the connotation is of these words in this context

Consequently, multinationals hire communicators who can do this translation as part of their job. This is a challenge that multinationals face, and the existing practices and structures do not meet the needs from employees and internal audiences in general. *‘People are not comfortable enough with the language itself and that is something that we have to overcome’*. Communicators admit that they need to work more on this aspect because language simply can prevent employees from engaging with the information provided but also with the organization itself. Multinationals are able to detect where there are language issues by listening to their local communications but also by tracking readership numbers on Intranet or ISM for instance.

Whilst language is just one aspect of internal crisis communication within a diverse workforce, another aspect is culture - in terms of national culture -. Because even in countries where people speak the same language, people would interpret things based on their cultural background. For instance, one of the communication practitioners said that one of the main challenges for a multinational nowadays is

That what can be an issue in a global context is maybe not an issue in the local context. But as we lived in a very open, transparent world a local issue can very quickly become a global issue

The local management team then should be able to act proactively in those situations in cooperation with the head offices. *“Interpreting the message in the right way and it's not only about the content it's also about the style”*, this phrase illustrates that cultural background needs to be incorporated in internal crisis communication. Local communicators with strong business understanding can help the organization to overcome this obstacle (*‘people who are based on the ground who are often the same nationality’*) but also, they are able to influence decision making. Indeed, according to my interviewees MNCs prefer to hire local communicators highly competent with a strong business understanding, which makes it hard to find

sometimes. As Falkheimer and Heide (2006) has put it, communicators need to be aware of the cultural nuances. It seems though that most of my interviewees do not have working experience outside of their home country. Here, one could argue how these people can be sensitive to local cultural nuances when they have been working for most of their life in the same country together with a quite homogeneous team. As Falkheimer and Heide (2010) have put it, homogeneous teams act in a uniform way, but as our world becomes more complex this means that complex problems require complex solutions. One of my interviewees – among the few- with many years of international experience said the following,

the culture of the nationality and the culture of the regions is much more being I think the fundamental force in terms of shaping communication habits rather than the corporate culture. The corporate culture is powerful but it's you know you often have been impacted by what is around you as a child growing up as a young and adult and taken more lessons than from what we see now in terms of the corporate and how that shapes people. The corporate culture does obviously shape people but it's in those lessons where it's much more forceful in terms of how people do things and why they do things.

Having this in mind local adaptation and proper framing of messages, becomes a critical aspect of effective communication in MNCs. Communication professionals working in multinationals value face to face communication. And face to face communication is a powerful way to overcome these cultural nuances.

5.6 The way to move forward

All multinationals try to integrate internal and external communication by creating for instance newsrooms where both functions are sitting together. They try to merge them to make sure that messaging is aligned but also in order to detect errors in the first place, so they can handle it internally and externally in the best possible way. As one of the interviewee mentioned

That's why we collapsed... and said internal and external, why do we have these boundaries? This is also an important stakeholder approach. So exter-

nal equals internal and internal equals external. Everything you send out by email has the potential to leak, so there is no kind of confidentiality.

Boundaries between internal and external communication are blurring nowadays. This does not mean though that internal and external communication should be one, on the contrary they should be aligned because the audiences that they serve are different and their strategic objectives are also unlike in nature. Internal communication has a pivotal part in the organizational life and this is the reason why communicators emphasized the importance of internal crisis communication; the quote below depicts this notion.

I think communicators are increasingly realizing that it's not about communicating to but communicating with. It's not so much about communicating what I would like to say but communicating about themes in terms of the things that people would like to know about and we would like to have a debate about.

The importance of dialogues and co-creation of understanding (sensemaking), will enable multinationals prevent from future crises but also to overcome critical situations along with their employees. Empathy is another aspect that some communicators raised during the interviews, and I will argue that empathy can be of a great help for multinationals especially due to the diverse workforce. Furthermore, valuing diversity should be a competitive advantage for MNCs, not a compliance issue. As the study conducted by Lorenzo et al. (2017) showed there is a clear correlation between diversity, innovation and profitability.

As generations are changing it was quite interesting to hear communicators' opinions about millennials and their trust relationship with the organization that they work for. The new generation of employees called millennials are digital natives, they constantly switch jobs and organizations. They are not like previous generations that used to work for a lifetime in the same organization. This shift has a clear implication on how multinationals should see trust relations with their own employees, but also in terms of reputation management. Trust became a critical factor in the interviews, especially about its connection to reputation. Communicators and the organization should trust its people, and the employees from their side should trust the organization. This can become reality only by engaging more, employees do not trust organizations that do not communicate about their plans as well as organization cannot trust people

who act spontaneously. Trust capital can be valuable asset for an organization during a crisis (Falkheimer and Heide, 2010).

As a final remark I would like to mention that MNCs seem to lack strategic planning. All these strategies are not connected and even nowadays there is a clear lack of understanding about ICC and its contributions to an organization. Multinationals seem to have in place various channels, structures and strategies, however, most of them are not managed to strategically integrate external and internal crisis communication. What I would suggest here is that internal crisis communications need to be utilized as part of the crisis management and only by doing these ICC practices can be developed further. Internal Communication professionals then need to drive this change by engaging more with the internal stakeholders and by making sure that *‘underestimation of your internal audience is the last thing that you should do’* as a communicator working for a multinational. A multinational is a communicative organism and our job as communicators is to enable leaders and employees to be strong communicators.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how multinationals practice internal crisis communication and in what ways they engage with their employees across the three phases of a crisis (pre-crisis, crisis, post-crisis). Multinationals have in place various internal channels and structures to make sure that information will reach all employees. However, there is a need for further development of their strategies when it comes to employee involvement. Even if according to communication professionals' view there are plans addressing employees in normal times as well as when a crisis hits, there is a substantial lack of plans for the post crisis period. Therefore, further engagement with the employees will lead to further development of internal crisis communication as a field. Employees can play a key role in preventing a crisis or contributing to crisis management when a crisis occurs, and as it was observed from the finding of this study when organizations engaged with their employees, they were surprised positively from their contributions. It needs strategic planning though but also room for improvisation.

6.1 Contributions of this study

One of the main conclusion of this study is that there are key factors (contingencies) that can be denominators of how multinational companies practice internal crisis communication. Starting from the way that the organization conceptualize crisis as a phenomenon which reflects the maturity of the organization and the preparedness strategies that there are in place. Looking at the way that these organizations define crisis, it was observed that the ones that have more complex definitions of what a crisis is, they had also in place various well-optimized strategies. They also invest in front resources to make sure that there are various channels internally, so they can reach all employees either digitally or physically, in case that one of them fails. The findings indicate that multinationals use internal crisis communication in the digital as well as the physical world, to interact with the internal stakeholders in order to make sense of critical situations. Taking a social constructionist standpoint, they understand that sensemaking is an outcome of social interaction which means further engagement

with the internal stakeholders. As the organizational culture shapes the organizational life respectively has clear implications to this interaction.

In the light of recent cyber-attacks many organizations try to be more mindful when it comes to technology. They do not underestimate the importance of off-line communication, and this is according to my opinion one of their main strengths to overcome cultural complexity. Face to face communication enables management (at all levels) and communicators to avoid misunderstandings and give a more human touch in the communication strategy. As one of the interviewees said, you cannot expect from the employees to drive a change when they [employees] have not been involved from the beginning. Internal crisis communication as crisis communication in general in an ongoing process that never ends (Coombs, 2015). This is something that organizations, or more particularly communication professionals that I had the chance to interview, have not fully realized.

Another interesting aspect concerns the importance of an internal network of local communicators. The insights of the current study can add to the finding from Ravazzani (2016), who showed the importance of local communicators in crisis situations. However, her study was based only on Danish companies. On the contrary, the current study provides valuable insights of how multinationals engage with their local or regional communicators as well as line management to overcome cultural complexities. Coming to a conclusion, regarding culture both as organizational culture but also as national culture, it was discovered that communication professionals increasingly realise that nowadays our profession is not about communicating to but communicate with the employees by taking into consideration what they have at stake. Adding to that, more empathy for cultural differences by trying to understand the cultural background will transform cultural differences from an obstacle to a competitive advantage for multinationals.

Post-crisis concerns were found to be one of the striking findings with the current study in my opinion. One of the reasons why I wanted to study multinationals was the fact that in comparison to small companies, they have the resources to develop internal crisis communication plans. I was surprised though that there were only a few organizations with specific strategies for the post crisis phase regarding the employees. The role of the post crisis plans and the potential employees' contribution for further improvement were neglected. There is a tendency when the organization returns to normality after a crisis for evaluation of the crisis manage-

ment (Coombs, 2015), but my interviewees were quite reluctant to my questions regarding this matter. This can potentially be explained either because they are not aware of these processes or because there are no plans at all. In both cases though organizational learning involves recording or storing information. Employees can contribute to this information from their expertise and because they are close to operations. So at least parts of the knowledge produced needs to be shared with them. Cases where organizations try to find scapegoats and then they replace them or even fire them, because they are perceived as the main root of the crisis, reflect an old way of thinking by throwing away learnings as a communication professional mentioned in one of the interviews.

As a final remark, multinationals seem to be preoccupied with fear instead of failure that high reliability suggests. Here, one could argue that due to the different nature of high reliability organizations and the regulations that most of multinationals are confronted, they are forced to be more risk avert. However, as it became evident from this study, most of multinationals they try to be more agile. Agility cannot be implemented though, unless organizations become more risk willing and more acceptable to mistakes. And just to make it clear here, I do not suggest that they should be more reluctant to mistakes in general, but intense training and simulations will provide an opportunity for ‘safe’ mistakes that can be source of learning for the organization itself. If, organizations see training as a cost only, they will never be able to improve and prevent a crisis in the future.

Combining all the above, this study provides substantial knowledge for communication professionals across industries on how to work with internal crisis communication but also valuable insights for further academic research that I will discuss in the following section.

6.2 Future research recommendations

The current study was a communication professionals’ approach on internal crisis communication. One of the suggestions for future research could be a case study in one only multinational where various stakeholders can be interviewed. This will provide broader insights integrating employees’, local communicators’ or line management’s perceptions and their needs regarding internal crisis communication. Moreover, multinationals are a great group of organizations that operate across different industries. Therefore, further studies on the role of the industry’s nature, and its influence on internal crisis communication are needed. Those kinds

of studies would clarify patterns and provide knowledge that can develop further internal crisis communication.

Another interesting aspect that it would be valuable to study is whether public or private organizations utilize internal crisis communication in a different way. Moreover, one of the findings in the current study was the role of diversity, which could be explored further. With regards to that, more studies focused on the diversity aspect and its correlation to communicate effectively would offer great insights into how much for instance homogeneous the communication teams in the headquarters are, and its implications.

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Appendix 1

Interview guide

Disclaimer

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of my thesis project. Ethical procedures for academic research undertaken from university institutions require that interviewees explicitly agree to being interviewed and how the information contained in their interview will be used. This is necessary for me to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation. I would therefore read you the following for your approve:

- the interview will be recorded and a transcript will be produced
- you will be sent the transcript and given the opportunity to correct any factual errors
- the transcript of the interview will be analysed by me (Angelos Vasileiou) only as research investigator
- access to the interview transcript will be limited to my supervisor (Mats Heide) and academic colleagues and researchers with whom I might collaborate as part of the research process
- any summary interview content, or direct quotations from the interview, that are made available through academic publication or other academic outlets will be anonymized so that you cannot be identified, and care will be taken to ensure that other information in the interview that could identify yourself is not revealed (anonymity)
- the actual recording will be (kept only by me)
- you can decide not to answer any question, or to stop the interview any time you want

- **Introduction – background information**

- Can you please describe your education background and your current role at (...)?
- Did you ever had crisis communication as part of your education or have you ever been trained for crisis communication? How did you end up working with crisis communication?
- How long have you been working for (...)?

- All these years working for (...) have you ever worked in other countries other than your home country? If yes where and do you think that by exposing yourself to new cultures that helped you to understand better cultural nuances? Can you give any examples?
- Why do you work for this organization for all these years?
- Have you worked in private and public sector? If so, did you experience any crises in both types of organizations? Have you spotted any differences in the approaches of these organizations in regards to crisis communication?
- What are the competence and abilities that you as a communicator can add in crisis situations?

Crisis Communication

In the organizations that you have been working for or with (as a consultant):

- Did they have a Crisis Response Team in your organization? Can you please elaborate on the tasks and its members? What is the specialization of each member in crisis response team?
- How were employees addressed in the crisis communication strategy?
- Was it effective? If yes, why so? If no, why it wasn't so successful?
- If you had the chance to go back and change something what would you change?
- What were the main learnings for these organizations after this crisis?
- Do you think that crises are good for organizations?
- What is crisis communication for you?

Internal Crisis Communication

- How would you define internal crisis communication?
- What is your approach for internal crisis communication in the organizations that you have been working with?
- What was your role and what did you do actually as a communication professional during a crisis? (give a few examples of work tasks and tactics)
- How did you engage with your employees before, during after a crisis? Mention specific tactics. (Preparedness ,continuous training, collecting, and evaluating relative information and developing two-way communication systems)
- Do you have or do you organize any crisis simulations (crisis exercise)? Have you ever taken part in one of those? Who participates on these?

- What type of channels did you use internally?
- How do you facilitate dialogue?
- What was different in your internal communication approach from the external one?
- How do you provide co-workers with fast information about the situation?
- How do you ensure that internal chats and discussion groups are active and that key actors distribute information and answer questions?
- Why do you think organizations underutilized internal crisis communication?
- Can you mention an example of effective internal crisis communication?
- What are your thoughts about resilience? How do you become mindful about errors that have already occurred?
- How do you find what can be done to prevent a similar situation in the future?

Multinationals

- Did the organisations that you have been worked for have a diverse workforce?
- How does your organization address the diverse workforce in the crisis communication planning? And particularly in internal crisis communication? Do you have any examples to mention?
- How do you empower local communicators and line managers to handle these issues?
- Was there a global network of local communicators or leaders? How did they use these networks during crisis?
- Many organizations have English as a corporate language, do you think that this is an asset for an organization or it can create problems? Given that people even if they speak the same language they interpret things according to their cultural background.

Organizational culture

- Do you think that organizational culture plays a role during a crisis? If so why? How strong was your organizational culture in the case that you were involved?
- What about the communication culture in all these organizations? Were people empowered to fail fast and learn? What about risk willingness?
- Can you please elaborate in the structure of these organisations? Did they have a decentralized or a centralized approach of handling a crisis? If do, what makes it...
- Did you provide consultancy to internal communicators and line managers and other key persons in order to help them formulate messages and identify actors and groups with whom they should be communicating?

- How do you frame the understanding of a crisis internally? What's your answer to employees' question "*what's the story?*"?
- Would you say that you had the autonomy and power to influence decisions?
- Did you discuss external media internally (internalizing communication) in case of a crisis, if yes, give me an example. In times of a crisis there is a need for commenting on and discussing what has been said on external media

Final part

- What do you think are the main challenges for communication practitioners in this field nowadays?
- Is there something that you would like to add?
- I always try to wrap it up with something positive. What comes to your mind as something that communication practitioners do really well nowadays compared to what they used to do when you entered in the industry?

End

I would like to thank you for your participation. We discussed quite many things and as I promised, within the following days I will send you the transcript.

Appendix 2

Article in EACD's blog

Internal Crisis Communication and Employee Engagement

Are communication practitioners ready to deal with a crisis? To what extent can other employees be of assistance in turbulent times? These are some of important questions communicators should be asking themselves.

Studies suggest that internal stakeholders are the most essential and dominant stakeholders in times of a crisis. However, it has been observed that internal crisis communication (ICC) is underutilized by organizations. Communication practitioners act as information distributors and they often rely on already existing strategies (mainly external communication strategies) expecting they will fulfill the mission of an internal communication plan.

To make it even more complicated, culture poses a great challenge to multinationals. Research highlights the importance of the cultural background of employees in internal communication and more particularly during a crisis. As a result, line managers and local communicators take the role of sensemaking facilitator. In other words, local managers and communicators act as cultural interpreters. However, line managers and local communicators need to be trained and empowered to do that before a crisis occurs.

Furthermore, an adaptation of internal crisis communication is not only about the translation of the text produced in headquarters. Local tailoring includes proper framing of the message, choice of the right channel (-s) and the most credible spokesperson among others. Communicators need to overcome complexities related to educational level or where the employees are located at (behind a desk, in a laboratory or in the field for instance). Consequently, public relations practitioners need to be more sensitive to the multicultural nuances of different publics, both in an international arena and within their own geographic locales.

On the other hand, employees also need to be given the tools to face and manage a crisis, be able to make sense of the situation and answer possible questions coming from families, friends and even from journalists. Management and communication practitioners should treat employees as active sensemakers as well as sensegivers and they should engage with as many as possible employees. This will provide a better understanding of the events and a great opportunity for management to get feedback, deal with rumors and lead the way on how to handle a crisis.

Employees can be mobilized before, during, and after a crisis situation given that they contribute as internal communicators as well as act as external corporate ambassadors. ICC as a function is responsible for the communicative interaction among managers and employees before, during and after an organizational or societal crisis.

Even though ICC has a lot to offer for communications practitioners, organizations can reap the benefits by only further developing their internal communication function. What about your organization? What is your approach to ICC? Have you experienced anything similar to the examples given above?

I am currently, writing my master thesis dissertation on this field and I would appreciate if you could spare some of your time (40-60 min) for an anonymous interview where we can discuss your approach and your own experiences regarding the matter.

About the author

Angelos Vasileiou holds a Bachelor degree in Communication and Media Studies from the University of Athens and, currently enrolled in the MSc in Strategic Communication at Lund University, Sweden.

Click [here](#) for the article.