



ICAO

Symposium on Assistance to Aircraft Accident Victims and their Families (AAAVF2021)

1 to 3 December 2021
Canary Islands, Spain

Hosted by



MINISTERIO
DE TRANSPORTES, MOVILIDAD
Y AGENDA URBANA

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“Even more than pain is
despair that overwhelms the
soul”

William Styron
Darkness Visible



- Case Study: The media coverage of a catastrophe is certainly a test for any professional or editorial team.
- And also a great opportunity to make some reflections on some key aspects of the journalistic routines to subsequently offer an accurate reconstruction of events and clarify, without confusion or informational poisonings, the different hypotheses and explain the causes of any air catastrophe.

UNIQUENESS OF THIS CASE

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- The Spanair crash is a paradigmatic case of creation of “informational noise” in a context of the absence of work methodologies and ethical frameworks in crisis situation.
- Strong battle of conflict interest.
- A lot of distortions that sought to influence the media agenda:
 - To lead certain lines of research.
 - To modify the story to favour certain interests.
 - To privilege the experts that were most supportive of certain thesis.



Variables in crisis communication: actions and consequences

| ANALYSED VARIABLES | ACTIONS | CONSEQUENCES |
|---|---|--|
| Prevention communication programmes | Drafting of the crisis management plan | Very little reaction after the first hours of the accident. |
| Public hearings | Holding of six press conferences | Lack of new data. Use of “declarative” journalism by the political class |
| Strategies of Communication | Big media: radio and TV | Spectacularisation and poor expert analysis |
| Implicated institutions | National, regional and local governments | Communication strategies that were “contaminated” or fixed by the institutions |
| Communication of events to external publics | Press conferences and press releases | Always dragging the media without giving them the opportunity to lead the agenda |
| Spokespersons | Different spokespersons: commercial director, director of personnel, President of SAS Group | Poor choice of spokespersons, who were not given specific tasks |
| Tools of communication | Public Relations for victims and their relatives: personalised treatment | Little empathy. Many questions were left unanswered |
| Post-crisis evaluation | Executed, but with doubts | Inability to finish the crisis effectively |

ELEMENTS OF THE INFORMATIVE DISTORTION

LEAKS

- First details on the recordings of the aircraft's black boxes (*El País*, Sept, 13 2008)
- Cadena SER (Sept, 15, 2008) obtains the statement made before the civil guard by the Commander of Iberia who landed at the time the MD-82 took off.
- Dissemination through different media of the draft of the preliminary report, written by the Investigation Commission (September, 16, 2008).
- Emergence of the video of the crash (*El País*, *El Periódico*), on September, 18, 2008, the same day the judge responsible for the accident met with engineers investigating the causes of the disaster.
- *El Periódico* gets its hands on the final draft of the Investigation Commission (16 August, 2008), and highlights that the report accuses Spanair of ignoring Boeing's manual of use.

VARIOUS FICTIONS

On August, 27, 2008, the Argentinean television programme "Todo Noticias" ("All news") disseminates a fake conversation between the pilots of the aircraft, moments before the accident.

POISONINGS AND "NOISE"

Development of different hypotheses about the accident, blaming or exonerating the aircraft manufacturer (Boeing) or the airline Spanair.

There are two opposed blocks in all the analysed process:

- Group Zeta/Unidad Editorial supported Boeing: defended the hypothesis pointing at "human error" and the ignoring of the Boeing manuals as the causes of the accident.
- Group Prisa supported Spanair. It put the blame on the recurrent failures in the aircrafts manufactured by the American company. But after the final report emerged, it recognised "a string of technical and human errors"



- THE TREATMENT OF THIS EVENT IN THE MEDIA PRESS, RADIO AND TV
- Bad Ethic and Journalistic practices:
 - Development of different hypothesis about the accident: blaming or exonerating the aircraft manufacturer (Boeing) or the airline (Spanair).
 - The Video of the accident was leaked by the Ministry of Public Works.
 - Director of Communication of this Ministry provided personally to broadcasters the recordings of the conversation between Spanair and the control towers.
 - The mediocre handling of crisis situation by an official government body allowed the person in charge of communication to commit criminal actions.

Timeline of the informative reality of the MD-82 accident ⁹

(August 2008 - December 2009)

Source: Author's creation.

| | First week | September 2008 | October 2008 | December 2008 | January 2008 | May 2008 | August 2008 | December 2009 |
|------------------------------------|------------|----------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|----------|-------------|---------------|
| First reconstruction of events | | | | | | | | |
| Initial hypothesis | | | | | | | | |
| Verification of initial hypotheses | | | | | | | | |
| First official reports (CIAIAC) | | | | | | | | |
| First official draft of CIAIAC | | | | | | | | |
| Judicial investigation | | | | | | | | |
| Information noises | | | | | | | | |



JOURNALISTIC DEFICITS

- Important questions have been left unanswered.
- Communication strategy “contaminated” or guided by institutions.
- Absence of a “sleeping website” to attend to the more than 20.000 inquiries on the day of the accident of subsequent days.
- Poor choice of spoken persons by Spanair and go in tow of events.
- Inability to effectively close the crisis (teaching of German Wings, Lufthansa, accident in the Alpes).



JOURNALISM, JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA: “DER KATASTROPHEN GENERAL”

- Unlike what happened in the 11-M bombings, in Spanair accident there was *little empathy for the pain and suffering of the victims and their families*: the requests of the survivors and their families were not properly covered by the mainstream media.
- There was *an alignment of the main media, with few exceptions, with the official thesis* of the *Investigation Commission*, and a little coverage of survivor's testimonies.
- There was *a myriad of crossed interest* represented by lobbyists, communication agencies, lawyers, politicians. The aim of all these was influencing the media agenda.
- The *news broadcast by television stations were strongly criticised* (“regrettable”) by Internet users. TV journalists seemed clearly contaminated by the techniques of trash

TEACHINGS FOR THE MEDIA

- *Always give the victims a voice* because they have no one to protect them.
- *Listen the victims story* so that the story of the power does not always prevail.
- *Equip yourself with methodologies of action for crisis situations* and remember that *the practice of journalism, always inquiry and research.*
- *Make a scrupulous selection of primary and secondary sources.* Avoid the great deficit in the crosschecking of different sources.
- *Application of ethical frameworks, embodied in deontological codes, capable of safeguarding the work of journalist.*



This catastrophe confirms once again that the most corrosive point of the current journalistic system, and therefore, the most pathogenic factor of the credibility of the media, lies precisely in the junction between the pressures of the pre-agenda and the bad practices in the editorial departments.

Thank You

