

International Inter-corporate Crisis Communication: Ethiopian Airlines, Boeing and the 737 Max 8 Tragedy

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Abstract

Leading corporate entities of the developing world often have to swim against the current as they do business internationally often facing sticky country of origin stereotypes. The present study interrogated inter-organizational crisis communication involving the American planemaker Boeing and its client Ethiopian Airlines over the controversy in the 737 Max 8 aircraft crash near the town of Bishoftu, which was preceded by a similar accident in Indonesia. Using Coomb's situational crisis communication (SCCT), contingency and framing theories as a theoretical framework and a comparative case study design the study analysed the interorganizational communicative performance of the two companies representing the Global North and the Global South within the temporal frame of 2019. The study used press releases issued by the two companies as the principal sources of discursive data to identify communicative strategies and crisis frames. Based on the strategies and frames identified the study further conducted rhetorical framing analysis to understand the rhetorical dimensions of the crisis communication of the corporate entities centering on denial, crisis responsibility, corporate apology and corrective action. By way of complementarily narrative accounts from commercial aviation and aerospace industry periodicals as well as global media and press reports were additionally used to address data gaps and obtain a full empirical picture. The study found that the two companies used differing strategies and frames with Ethiopian airlines being more on the defensive and Boeing being more involved in the rhetoric of renewal. The study also discovered that interorganizational accommodation and corporate advocacy were rhetorically revealed in the inter-corporate communicative interchange. Implications for theory, research, methodology, practice and policy are indicated.

Keywords: Max 8, MCAS, Boeing, Ethiopian Airlines, Accident, crisis, framing, certification

1. Introduction

1.1 Crisis communication

Much of what business do in terms of communication is to protect and promote a valued corporate identity which is ‘a firm’s strategically planned and purposeful presentation of itself’ (Westcott Alessandri 2001: 177). This identity is often tested in times of crises. In the organizational literature crisis is understood as “a people-stopping, show-stopping, product stopping, reputationally defining event, which creates victims and/or explosive visibility.” (Lukaszewski, 2001: 203). Crisis has also been defined as “a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly” (Pierson and Clair 1998: 60). It may be characterized by a period of anxious wait involving uncertainty about scope and extent of damage and impact. With the media now diverse and round the clock the crisis can be highlighted and framed in a variety of aggravating ways until the full scope of the tragedy and facts of attribution are established. Publics can be a miscellany of stakeholders national and international given the globalizing of much of what goes on even within national borders. This trend is no where clearer than in the aviation business moving people and things around the world based on interorganizational arrangements. A crisis manifested in such contexts will involve international interorganizational communication. The post crisis communication that followed Ethiopian airlines as the carrier, Boeing as the supplier of aircraft was a demonstration of the characteristics of such international interorganizational coordination. The intercorporate level of analysis has become attractive to organizational scholars (H'akansson 1989, Hakansson and Snehota 1989)

Extant research has for the most part addressed intraorganizational postcrisis communication scenarios within national boundaries (Molleda & Laskin, 2005). While with increasing interstate or multinational arrangements on the rise, the need for parallel attention to this emerging area of crisis management requires new models of research. The crisis was in essence organizationally related to both Ethiopia and the United States although the far-reaching consequences can be seen in the nationalities involved in the

Max Max 8 tragedy described as a ' global tragedy ' representing victims from 35 countries .

This study represents an attempt to address the interorganizational crisis communication in line with theoretical and empirical literature relating to aviation crisis communication. The effort represents a response to the calls for more interrogation of crisis situations with boundary spanning characteristics (Borden 2016) to address the paucity of scholarship in the area of inter-corporate crisis communication (Berthod, Müller-Seitz, and Sydow 2014) . It also ventures into the unexplored subject of crisis involving corporations that hail from high contrast techno-cultural backgrounds. Further the study unfolds the protective layer of organizational national identity (Brijs, 2006) as may be evidenced in attribution of responsibility in a bilateral corporate experience of crisis with a tendency to find blameworthy the external entity even without demonstrable evidence owing to selective memory processes. These refer to country of origin effects -preexisting beliefs that shape judgements of crisis responsibility that serve to simplify albeit at the cost of objectivity the complex information context created in a high impact high affect crisis such as a plane crash (Noorderhaven and Harzing. 2003).

Due to cognitive vulnerabilities people and press may fail to accommodate divergent possibilities and engage in more comfortable less expensive motivated reasoning and prevent cognitive dissonance that can lead to affective and cognitive discomfort (Frey 1986; Gerber 1999; Kunda 1990). The technical level asymmetry of the two countries represented can have implications for attributions of crisis responsibility until the full picture emerges in the final stage of the crisis investigation¹. The technical gap stereotype can harm third world carriers as the prejudged party owing to a national pr burden with cues about them being generally less safe or even unsafe characterized by poor aviation standards.

The halo effect also points to the possibility of a virtuous history being taken as an asset in downplaying roles in a later crisis or a positive misattribution of responsibility against a less historically positively located

party (Coombs 1995a) attributable to the press which is behind much of the stereotyping and image determination (Lowe 1995; Avraham and Ketter 2016). The subject of the aviation crisis involving EAL and Boeing is a case of “joint constructions of reality” (Heart and Courtright 2003: 86) with each affected party trying to impose its own frame until a joint construction of the event emerges. At stake is corporate reputation as a crucial asset (Fombrun and van Riel, 2004).

Although they are rare occurrences, aviation disasters are dramatic drawing global attention and considerable stakeholder scrutiny. The effect is not limited to national or international airmakers but may include even countries or national governments (Ray, 1999). In recent aviation historiography such media attention have been Spanair flight 5022 in 2008 and Air France flight AF447 in 2009 (CIAIAC, 2011) and more recently the ill-fated Malaysia Airways (Zafra, and Maydell, 2018). Ethiopian airlines itself has had a few tragedies. The severity of air disasters has implications for crisis communication strategies and the business reputation as well as survival of the carrier involved.

1.3 Theoretical perspectives

1.3.1 Theories of situational crisis communication, contingency and framing

According to Coombs (2007) crisis communication requires a management approach that is contextually fitting and appropriate. His typologies of crisis states place the organization experiencing a disorder in different categories and levels of reputational risk in proportion to the magnitude and scope of the crisis and the attendant level of responsibility of the organization facing the prospect of further harm. It appears from the classification that the categories are not neatly definable as there is a possibility of co-occurrence of multiple causative scenarios and damage that may be moderated by contextual considerations.

In the context of aviation crisis, there are specific strategies which Coombs (2007) suggests are suited to aviation disasters that can have a wide range of severity levels including number of affected passengers, survivors, killed or missing/unrecoverable. The geography of the accident itself can be a factor given the implications for search and rescue operations and any

success from such procedure.

The victim cluster category is a type in which the entity itself is a victim and responsibility of attribution is typically low as the causative agent could be another entity related to the organization affected as a supplier or other category partner. The accidental cluster often is evocative of aviation disasters but the implicated corporate actions may not have deliberate roles in the accident such as rogue attacks or by militaries. Although responsibly attributions can be minimal and reputational effect moderate, publics directly involved may frame the accident differently blaming the organization for negligence or error of judgment.

What best describes an aviation accident would be the technical-error accidents category- in which the primary factor would be defective technology for which the organization is held to be palpable and reputational stain can be bad considering the lack of trust or breach of trust involved and the implied disregard for human wellbeing being. Human error accidents are also relevant in aviation crisis. Such accidents although not specifically noted by Coombs (2007) are common discourses expressed as pilot error with the reputation threat to a carrier in proportion to the magnitude of the accident and loss of life. Stakeholders are likely vigorously involved in criticism and litigation for compensation. Reputation damage in terms of safety is critical and business effect can be catastrophic.

Contingency theory of public relations is also an important contribution to the field as it places responses on a continuum from pure advocacy to pure accommodation. Its tenets are refinements of excellence theory and call for responses to crises to be realistically located on a continuum contingent on the characteristics of a particular crisis situation (Cutlip1985).

While accidents and other objective issues can be crises the subject is about facts as much as it is about the framing of issues. In fact rhetorical considerations reflect organizational phenomena more realistically in as much as organizations are intensely multi-meaning environments with

rhetors having to choose one of the myriad meanings to project in defense of an organization (Ihlen 2011a). Crises are rhetorically fertile organizational phenomena and the choices of lenses (or ‘the contest of alternatives’ (Mackey, 2008: 49) are essentially necessary to protect vested interests.

Rhetoric is organic; it assumes that policy and preference are forged through assertion and counter assertion...Rhetoric is strategic; it requires planning in response to a rhetorical problem. Rhetoric is predicated on the superiority of some ideas, evidence, policy options and produce/service preferences that are improved through the contest of alternatives (Mackey, 2008: 49). Framing theory offers a broader conceptual analytical framework to understand crisis public relations than any other theory relevant to public relations (Hallahan 1999).

Framing is an important public relations strategy in the communication of perspectives that are born out of and consistent with claimed organizational posture. It relates to selective content communication and salience features in the definition and resolution of a crisis situation. An attribution of responsibility is indicated using framing discursively in particular with regard to news and attribution of responsibility. Framing becomes apparent when interorganizational responsibility is ambiguous especially early during a crisis. Thus organizations involved will communicate frames that typically tend to exonerate their entity and attribute the responsibility to a partner using all rhetorical ways.

1.4 Research questions

RQ1: What specific crisis response strategies did the parties use in responding to the crisis?

RQ2: Which of Coombs’ crisis response types did EAL and Boeing use when framing the crisis in relational interorganizational terms?

RQ3: How did the employed frames change over the course of the crisis phase (e.g., crisis, postcrisis)?

RQ4. What balance was used between advocacy and accommodation in the display of stance?

2. Method

Comparative case study

The comparative case study method is selected which involves case identification, data collection, evidence structuring and evidence driven construction of explanations. Narratives intersect micro, meso and macro levels of analysis (Fairhurst, & Putnam, 2004). This innovative approach is driven by “two logics of comparison: first, the more common compare and contrast logic; and second, a “tracing across” sites or scales” with important heuristic consequences (Bartlett and Vavrus 2017:1).

The adopted processual approach asks “..... *how x* plays a role in causing *y*, what the *process* is that connects *x* and *y*” (Maxwell, 2013: 31). It seeks to move beyond bounded categories and appreciate the intersection and interplay between institutions that may be misunderstood as being static disparate units (Heath & Street, 2008) while acknowledging their identity. There of course is a bounding of evidence and dimensions of organizational and temporal factors to aid visibility of peculiarity as well as commonality (Yin, 2011: 33-34). Case study has been hailed as “a bridge across paradigms” (Luck et al. 2006,103) allowing ontological, epistemological and methodological flexibility and liberty (Rosenberg, & Yates, 2007).

For the data analysis which is anchored in multimethodology (Mingers, and Brocklesby 1997), analytical techniques involving, first, content analyses of strategies and frames and then the method of rhetorical analysis were used to understand the intra- and inter-corporate crisis communications. Following the identification of crisis response strategies, content analysis was used to identify frames in the Ethiopian Airlines’ and Boeing’s press releases as specialized corporate discourses taking individual paragraphs as discursive sights for content mining. The frame identification was subjected to intercoder reliability tests. Intercoder reliability is a major methodological consideration in content analysis that has to be addressed to ensure data quality. Defined as “the extent to which independent coders evaluate a characteristic of a message or artifact and reach the same conclusion” (Lombard et al., 2002: 589), it is considered “the standard measure of research quality” (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991, p. 248). Subsequent data analysis and interpretation will depend on the level of intercoder reliability demonstrated in the content coding. In other words a demonstration of the

trustworthiness and replicability of the content units is important in crucial ways (Neuendorf, 2002). While there are numerous reliability measures this study employed in this study using SPSS Macro it was possible to calculate Krippendorff's alpha at an acceptable .83 for crisis response strategies and .79 for crisis frames. . In the present study two coders were involved as in most other studies (Kolbe and Burnett's 1991).

Despite the reliability and implied validity obtained, content analysis was however not considered adequate in terms of revealing the complexities of the nature of language use in rhetorical genres such as the press releases. While content analysis can demonstrate important qualities of objectivity, precision, and generality, this is nonetheless inadequate. According to Shoemaker and Reese (1996:32) the content analysis of this description "does not provide a complete picture of meaning and contextual codes, since texts may contain many other forms of emphasis besides sheer repetition." This deficiency requires that another method is employed to address this important limitation of superficiality.

Therefore a more nuanced method of rhetorical framing analysis was additionally used. In support of rhetorical analysis, Burke (1970, p18) reminds us that 'the word is not the thing' which translates in to and helps to mirror the importance of the critical rhetorical methodological position in corporate communication (Livesey 2002). As Crable (1990) states corporate rhetors speak as a collective voice of a corporate community and a broad community of stakeholders which points to the importance of corporate rhetoric (Cheney, et al 2004).

Rhetoric may be defined as the strategic use of communication to achieve specified goals (Kopyers 2010, 299). Rhetoric is an art and so is rhetorical criticism. Rhetorical criticism as a method is beyond 'the area of the formula', and much like literary criticism is about imagination, creativity, perception, and position taking. Indeed despite its prestige science does not have all the answers and illusive complexities of the human condition and human organization open up space for other ways of understanding including through humanistic ways as in art which explains the growing

importance of the ‘linguistic turn ‘ and the allied ‘rhetorical way ‘in corporate contexts.

In this corporate research tradition numerous rhetorical strategies have been identified (Cheney et al., 2004) and are commonly used in corporate communication most notably in press releases that aim at stakeholder persuasion as well as corporate impression management designed to “counteract undesirable consequences of information releases” (Merkl-Davies et al. 2011: 320) that attend a corporate crisis.

While much in corporate governance is monitored managers have considerable leverage in their press releases to important stakeholders in ways that liberally employ self-serving communications because these are not typically subject to scrutiny (Bowen, Davis, & Matsumoto, 2005).

Inspections of press releases have been guided by a number of considerations most notably defining parameters including textual strategies that defend the legitimacy of the corporate entity and its actions. Contextually legitimacy has been defined as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman 1995: 574) . Thus when confronted with a rhetorical communication the researcher will enquire into the ethical appeals and trustworthiness of the text as crucial desideratum, the affective gentility of the text (Crowley and Hawhee 1999) or its evocative powers , the logical competence of the appeals being made helping audience identify (Kennedy 1999), issues rhetorically sellable through invoking a common bond for example or showing them in comparative perspective, transcendence-a world of higher possibilities-for all, or victimage.

The rhetorical method also includes examination of metadiscourse. Metadiscourse is extratextual material in a communication that markets the CEO and his credibility helping him enhance a corporate reputational standing and humanizing the entity (Hyland 1998). It has rational, persuasive and affective appeals. The analytical approach followed is

generative since a predetermined set of analytical units can impact the interpretative depth and breadth based on the discourse that is typically situated (Foss 2009). Sampling involved more than 95 % of press releases produced by both companies in the crisis communication period between March 10 of the day of the air crash and July 17, 2019 when Boeing announced a compensation package of the first installment of its pledged 100 million near-term relief for families of the victims of the Lion Air Flight 610 and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 accidents.

To compensate for any data gaps arising out of the dependence on press releases and further assure complementarity, a supportive database of relevant communications from the commercial aviation and aerospace periodical literature is employed together with pertinent narratives from the New York Times, Washington Post, Seattle Times, Bloomberg, CNN, BBC and the local ENA centering on the aviation event, its prelude and the aftermath. The narratives from these different media outlets including those from commercial aviation periodicals were micro-textually sprinkled across relevant empirical need areas to further enhance the discourses embodied in the corporate press releases. The approach was to weigh in the discursive value of the texts so they are able to add value to the inter-corporate narratives studied for communicative significance.

Together the data sets helped to raise the data profile and quality understood as informational completeness and strategic fitness for a set purpose (Woodall and Parlikad 2013), In sum the choice of three methods to interrogate the corporate discourse was a strategic undertaking dictated by the different research questions which required correspondingly different analytical procedures and interpretive mechanisms. Thus the questions asking crisis communication strategies would require content analysis of strategies as suggested by Coomb (2007b). Media data was also necessary to furnish more complete answers to the research questions and lead to a better understanding of the communication crisis handling by the corporate bodies.

2.1.1 Limitations

Like any other study the present interrogation suffers from a few limitations that pertain to the novelty of the undertaking in the context of

inter-organizational events. Thus empirical literature examining inter-corporate crisis communication was acutely limited in the subfield of commercial aviation while case studies on air navigation events have been addressed intra-organizationally such as those of Singapore Airways (Henderson 2003) and Air Malaysia (Park, Bier, and Palenchar 2016). A second limitation concerns the lack of full correspondence between crisis communication strategies and specific crisis frames arising from the fact that the crisis framing literature in organizational communication studies is yet embryonic and in context has not kept up pace with the strategies literature. Nevertheless despite the limitations the study represents an important step in the theoretical, methodological and empirical arenas serving as a trailblazer for further studies that are so much in demand given the recurrent crisis that characterizes many Ethiopian and international organizations.

2.1.2 Description of study organizations

Founded in 1945 Ethiopian Airlines is Africa's biggest carrier with a history of over seven decades of aviation business.

A Star Alliance member, since December 2011, it has a solid reputational history but it also has a record of accidents that made global headlines. The Aviation Safety Network (2019) which keeps records of aviation events internationally reports that Ethiopian Airlines has had 61 accidents and incidents since 1965. The March 10, 2019 accident was unprecedented in both magnitude and impact.

Boeing is the world's biggest aerospace manufacturer with a history of over a century. Based in the US it is a key supplier of aircraft to carriers globally including Ethiopian Airlines. In 2018 the aerospace company was ranked 19th on the "World's Most Admired Companies" list (Fortune 2018). But in late 2018 and early 2019 the company faced challenges when its best selling MAX 8 aircraft crashed in Indonesia and Ethiopia. Following the crash in Ethiopia first Ethiopian Airlines and then Chinese and European and eventually all other carriers grounded the aircraft pending regulatory overhaul and recertification by aviation authorities. The grounding has been unprecedented in aviation history producing some of the biggest media and corporate communication coverage ever.

2.1.3 Data Analysis, Results and Discussion

Strategies and attendant frames are identified from the press releases based on the situational strategies of situational crisis communication. These have categories and subcategories of frames derived from the strategies. However since the strategies do not address interorganizational crisis communication strategies, further identification of frames is necessitated based on the press releases as organizational position-taking discourses. Broadly the crisis frames address problem definition, causal interpretation, moral assessment, and treatment recommendations (Entman 1993: 52). Thus the aviation tragedy is defined, the cause is interpreted, the event is morally evaluated, and recommendation is made for software improvement to prevent further tragedies.

Table 1: Crisis communication Strategies of Boeing and Ethiopian Airlines Press releases

Strategy	Ethiopian Airlines	%	Boeing	%
Deny	11	44	1	2.32
Diminish	3	12	4	9.30
Deal	11	44	38	88.37
Total	25	100	43	100

As Table 1 shows the two companies clearly differ in their communication strategies with Ethiopian Airlines engaged heavily in the deny cluster (constituting 44 % of strategies) and deal cluster (making up 44 %). Contrariwise Boeing was involved primarily in the deal cluster (taking up 90 %) of all crisis communication strategies. Boeing was unengaged in the deny cluster preferring silence as a strategy dealing with unfavorable media reports.

Table 2: Messages and Frames in Ethiopian Airlines' and Boeings' press releases

<u>Strategy</u>	<u>Ethiopian Airlines strategies</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Corresponding frames</u>	<u>Boeing strategies</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Corresponding frames</u>
Deny cluster						
Attack the accuser	5	20	Reputational victimisation			
Denial	5	20	blameless, trustworthy	1	2.32	Plane is safe
Scapegoat	1	4	disassociation			
Diminish cluster						
Excuse	2	8	Concern , regret, condolence	4	9.30	Chain of events
Justification	1	4	Similarity with Lion Air			Multiple factors (mitigation)
Deal cluster						
Ingratiation	4	16	Competent, reliable	17	39.53	Cooperation, collaboration, mutual legitimacy, commitment, trust
Concern	5	20	Concern for families and friends	11	25.58	Concern for families and friends
Compassion				2	4.65	compensation
Regret	2	8	remorse	5	11.62	remorse
Apology				3	6.97	Responsibility, corrective action ,reassurances
Total	25	100		43	100	

Table 2 details the range of crisis communication strategies (including figures) and frames employed by Ethiopian Airlines and Boeing. Ethiopian Airlines assumed a more defensive posture as its self-focused projections seemed to suggest the company was a victim of stereotypes, despite its acknowledged position as a leader in the aviation business with an impressive safety record. The stereotypically produced media narratives were able to cause an overreaction and a threat of litigations by the Ethiopian company. Ethiopian Airlines mentioned it was a victim of media calumny that had prejudiced country of origin (COO) roots based on

Ethiopia's technical level as a nation from the Global South. But it was tactful and cool in asserting that it was a proud leader in the aviation world symbolizing the *New Spirit of Africa*. In its decision to ground the MAX 8 it presented the insightful argument that the Ethiopian accident bore similarities with the Lion Air crash-a move which was able to set the first steps for the entire global set of MAX 8 to be grounded in due course as endorsed by regulators in many countries. In this tactful manner Ethiopian framed the accident albeit indirectly as a Boeing responsibility. In subsequent crisis period as more evidence emerged from the air crash investigation as well as journalistic investigative reports as those of the Seattle Times² which suggested the regulatory laxity and corporate reluctance that led up to the tragedy- the responsibility frame also shifted to the Boeing company more solidly.

Ethiopian airlines as a more confident entity now offered an endorsement of the Boeing Company as a trusted partner -which the planemaker repaid the African company in rhetorically uplifting terms. But Ethiopian was also all along remorseful and expressed regret about the tragedy that could have been prevented and the lives that could have been saved. Early as the news of the tragedy was aired, Boeing expressed sympathy and mentioned its readiness to send a team to provide technical assistance to the Ethiopian team. The frame of cooperation was side by side presented with Boeing's statement and frame that the Max 8 was a safe plane insinuating the accident was caused not because of technological reasons but as it more subtly signaled due to a 'chain of events'. Once the preponderance of evidence pointed to software technology playing a role the company was headed in a more positive discourse of taking full responsibility, apology, trust rebuilding and compensation. These served as defining frames in the determination of the closure of the bigger part of the crisis communication. On the other hand, the Boeing Company preferred silence as a strategy in spite of growing media disclosures and criticisms about the manner in which it inaugurated the malfunctioning MAX 8 software using shortcuts and disregarding safety concerns. Instead it chose offering apology, compensation to families of victims framing and eclipsing the tragedy in the context of a background of excellence in aviation, innovation and a future scenario of aviation safety that overcomes today's tragedies in Ethiopia and

Indonesia.

2.1.4 Rhetorical framing analysis

Broadly the crises frames address problem definition, causal interpretation, moral assessment, and treatment recommendations (Entman 1993: 52). Thus the aviation tragedy is defined, the cause is interpreted, the event is morally evaluated, and recommendation is made for software improvement to prevent further tragedies.

Methodologically Kuypers (2005) has stated that as framing naturally is rhetorically based, it follows that the most natural way to investigate framing would be rhetorically and in a comparative fashion. Kuypers (2005) states that until they are constructed in ways often competitive that sound credible in several rival ways the facts themselves assume an objective existence. This factuality may be tied to the first moments of an air crash or other tragedies until media and other stakeholders subsequently bring forth their 'terministic screens' (Burk 1966) in conformity with the schema preexisting of a particular community of meanings that views the unfolding issues with a preferred perspective (van Gorp 2010) that is often anecdotally and stereotypically-based yet a coherent and handy simplifier of what would otherwise be interpretive complexities without an angle (Goffman 1974). Therefore it is important to understand framing as its persuasive role has been demonstrated even considering that publics have independent cognitive resources (Nisbet, 2010).

Framing was related in the inter-corporate contexts to the actions of the pilots ('followed Boeing recommended procedures or exceeded speed recommendations'), an application (MCAS was to blame), responsibility (Boeing is held responsible-'we own it'), company (has a proud history and high reputation) and its values (safety), its acts (commitment expressed in compensation offers).

Initially, the Ethiopian Airlines accident report was received as a routine air disaster like any other but soon enough a flood of frames ensued. The competing frames addressed attribution of responsibility with the spotlight on the Ethiopian Airlines as the culpable party based on stereotypes of the Global South suggesting relative technical backwardness that would be assumed easily to lead to accidents of the kind. Whilst the Ethiopian carrier issued a number of press statements on the day of the tragedy admitting the

occurrence of a crash, it nonetheless gave the barest minimum details in terms of causation.

In conformity with aviation crisis protocol, the first two EAL press releases gave factual information about the aircraft; schedule and passengers, instructing information, a second press release mentioned there were no survivors, offered condolences with the CEO speaking at the crash site, signaling the gravity of the tragedy. Further details were made public in a press conference on the same day. In the day's press releases the company stressed that it was too early to ascribe any cause mentioning the manufacturer would also be involved in the determination of the cause of the accident. While maintaining it was too early to speculate about causes, the press release nevertheless preemptively mentioned the pilots had appropriate credentials adding the aircraft had undergone full overhaul and was impliedly categorically flight-worthy (Plane "underwent a rigorous first check" (EAL 2019C). There has been a consideration of the important role of prolepsis which refers to anticipatory framing that is intended to offset the effect of expected rival frames that if left un-addressed can defeat a projected frame (Phillips 2019).

As predicted soon enough narratives started to surface that the carrier was to blame on account of inadequate pilot training and poor credentialing. The anticipatory frame did not prevent the new media frame of Ethiopian Airline's culpability as the company was facing media speculations about the pilots and their adequacy as causes of the accident. The rhetorical preemption was however able to find sympathetic frames on account of the preceding air Lion Air crash which bore striking similarities which started to play out squarely as a powerful narrative in many cases dominant frame. Fortunately for Ethiopian Airlines reports reputationally uplifted the carrier as having a good safety record. Alongside the anticipatory rhetorical selfdefence Ethiopian Airlines' focus was on the trauma of loss. Indeed the second and third press releases emphasized the human side of the tragedy and appropriate communication of grief and sympathy which was in line with Burke's idea of the importance of identification as a persuasive relational strategy (Burke 1969). The affective care that is in keeping with corporate protocol nonetheless was cautious about any communication that

would send any signal that the carrier had a role.

International media reports by outlets considered credible started to surface with blame narratives centering on the Ethiopian airlines. The Ethiopian crash put the spotlight on the flag carrier as the responsible party for a number of causatively suspected factors from poor pilot training to inadequate pilot experience. EA provided a rebuttal that the flight time of the first officer was contrary to media reports and public speculations in full accord with ICAO regulations and requirements. As a further safety enhancement procedure it stated it had a crew pairing policy where senior pilots were paired up with junior partners. Another media report about the pilot training and more relevantly the pilot conversion to the new MAX 8 from the older NG was to be repudiated by Ethiopian Airlines in a reactive press release “Ethiopian Airlines³ pilots completed the Boeing recommended and FAA approved differences training from the B-737 NG aircraft to the B-737 MAX aircraft before the phase in of the B-737-8 MAX fleet to the Ethiopian operation and before they start flying the B-737-8 MAX.” In this regard the carrier engaged in diverse forms of ingratiation that included self-promotion, protective ingratiation to ward off potential passenger reaction translated into loss of trust and business loss, and significance ingratiation as it proudly mentioned its place in aviation business in Africa and its safety record as well as its aviation academy.

Ethiopian seemed to frame the tragedy as a vulnerable victim of a protected corporate giant that would be considered at first sight impeccable as a technology provider from an elite nation with implied credibility advantages. For EAL a siege mentally seemed to have ensued owing to the viral narratives of blames⁴ that were globally mass spread by some of the most respected media outlets in the US and globally –CNN, New York Times and Washington Post. This global media scrutiny led to the company engaging a semblance of intimidation of court litigation⁵. A broader communicative behavior of defensiveness seemed to characterize the carriers’ early communications.

Ethiopian also assumed a defensive posture when it called on “all parties to

refrain from ‘uniformed, incorrect, irresponsible and misleading statements’ while the accident investigation is underway”. In conformity with accident investigation protocols Ethiopian Airlines (2019) offered a strong rebuttal in self defence offering an alternative narrative drawing internationally attention to what it called “misleading reports”. The rhetorical frame was that Ethiopian Airlines was projecting a discourse that the media reports lacked correct information, were biased, and reckless about the consequences of their verdict-conveying the message it was becoming the object of victimization.

The African company referred to international rules of aviation crisis communication when it declined to comment on speculations. Indeed the IATA (2016) crisis communication protocol recommends that affected carrier refrain from commenting on causation, pilot behavior, pilot training, pilot error possibilities, and the role of air traffic control. Boeing was less concerned about the media scrutiny that followed including reports suggesting the company was blameworthy based on audiotapes of meetings with pilots. Despite the media frames making the company liable in the preventable accidents it did not refer to the media reports in any of the press release of the air crash.

As a further step in self-affirmation and image maintenance (Wu et al 2011) in proportion to the reputational threat Ethiopian Airlines was facing, it was engaged in ingratiation in the effort to protect its threatened image using its historical record as a resource. The ingratiatory communication was not limited to ingratiatory image but was extended to a conciliated other oriented deprecatory implicative communication. It thanked the international flying public for the continuing confidence in EAL

While it did dwell on the idea of convergence the subject of divergence was now necessary. In performing ‘strategic division’ (Phillips, 2019) on the next day Ethiopian Airlines in a press lease mentioned that it had decided unilaterally to ground all Max 8 aircraft to be on the side of precaution⁶ (EAL 2019A) again strengthening the frame that the MAX 8 aircraft and by implication the plane maker are likely culpable while Boeing was unprepared for such a move which would suggest an admission of

responsibility by the aerospace giant. This move bolsters the point that frames serve to highlight a particular aspect of an unfolding reality while playing down rival possibilities in our case pilot error. Indeed frames are employed to serve problem definition, establish causes, besides moral evaluation and suggesting cures (Kuypers 2010).

Contextually the Ethiopian Airlines- Boeing partnership may be viewed as a case of tension in interorganizational business collaboration (Gray & Purdy, 2014) that has consequences for continuing relationships which can be complicated by the coming on board of a business rival Airbus. This construct called interorganizational tension management was evident in the framing of the air disaster in the initial phase of the crisis. The crisis tested how the partners appraise each other's actions and their agenda of partnership overall in terms of relational review.

The Boeing-EAL intercorporate relationship may be reviewed in terms of value co-creation, or value co-destruction or interactive value creation (Echeverri and Ska°le'n 2011), Both corporate bodies want “a true value-adding partnership”, and review any partnership issues in this light. A review would mean in other words, the past shapes the present, the present shapes the future, the future—in terms of expectations—shapes the present, and the present shapes how we perceive and interpret the past (Giddens, 1984).

Ethiopian Airlines took the first step in the expression of interorganizational solidarity⁷ as the spotlight was now shifted to Boeing and its role in the series of air crash tragedies. *Ethiopian* was on a moral high ground amid the unresolved controversy engaged in corporate morality- a reminder of Burke's idea that organizations can be “joined and separate, at one distinct substance and consubstance with another” (Burke 1966, 21). While the African carrier made subtle finger-pointing at the planemaker it was also investing in recounting the corporate excellence of a partner. This rhetorical performance (‘Ethiopian Airlines believes in Boeing⁸’) was both affinity strengthening and an expression of magnanimity expressed through rhetorical damage control in the aid of a valued corporate partner-which may be taken as exemplifying the complimentary other-enhancement frame

(Gordon 1996) in the ingratiation cluster.

Prudent organizational narcissism was projected as the carrier engaged in international impression management as a reliable partner from unorthodox technical contexts. There was also rhetorical humility and compassion seeking “In a nation that sometimes is saddled with negative stereotypes, accidents like this affect our sense of pride” (EAL 2019B). However Boeing did rhetorically commend Ethiopian Airlines in a complementary return of favors as a pride for the continent with a long and treasonable record of service and safety⁹ (Boeing 2019A) -a testimonial the carrier needed at a difficult time of stereotype driven media speculation and attendant brand threats. They shared the frame-the accident would not indeed define the carrier-nor the aircraft-maker. All along Boeing emphasized the collective sense of grief and mourning over the calamities of human loss as a vital compassion strategy at a difficult time. Interorganizational endorsement was a frame employed as a crucial corporate governance strategy which was more than a case of a surface level exchange of rhetorical favours. There was no explicitly made counter framing by either entity except perhaps in reference to attribution of responsibility regarding the role of pilot behaviour and technology represented by the MCAS.

Owing perhaps to the suddenness of the shock of the news of the crash Boeing’s statement on the day of the crash was a standard expression of sympathy and support to Ethiopian Airlines and a spirit of partnership with the manufacturer promising to send a technical team to assist in the investigation together with the US National Transportation Safety Board-giving a clear hint of a collaboration frame. The subsequent press release however was intent on an extended rhetorical and dramaturgical selfdefence starting with its assertion that the plane involved in the accident is ‘a safe airplane that was designed, built and supported by our skilled employees who approach their work with the utmost integrity’ adding the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS) was ‘a flight control software enhancement for the 737 MAX, designed to make an already safe aircraft even safer’ (Boeing 2019B). The frame adopted clearly suggests that the planemaker believes the responsibility for the accident rested with factors outside of the technical aspects of the plane and the software possibly

pilot error implicating Ethiopian Airlines was to blame. As such the company felt it saw no grounds for grounding the Max 8 asserting Boeing's 737 MAX Flight Crew Operations Manual (FCOM) and Operations Manual Bulletin (OMB) provide adequate safety procedures. Software updates are mentioned but what the need was for the updates is not mentioned but 'feedback received from our customers' was eclipsed as it would point to the flaws noted by pilots.

In the next press release (Boeing 2019C), Boeing continued to assert confidence in the Max 8 still clinging to a selfdefence rhetoric and a frame of freedom from culpability. It was consistently insistent that 'Safety is Boeing's number one priority and we have full confidence in the safety of the 737 MAX' as it tacitly considered inappropriate the Ethiopian Airlines decision to ground the Max 8.' We understand that regulatory agencies and customers have made decisions that they believe are most appropriate for their home markets'. On the next day of March 13, the company reasserts that it 'continues to have full confidence in the safety of the 737 MAX' to recommend the grounding of 'entire global fleet of 737 MAX aircraft 'but mentions that the suspension was to 'reassure the flying public of the aircraft's safety 'again in sustained defence of the involved aircraft.

The report by the accident investigation team was a gamechanger in the interorganizational crisis communication as it vindicated Ethiopian airlines with the report establishing unequivocally the accident was attributable to Boeing's software (While others did mention a degree of pilot error of judgement¹⁰). The accident was caused by 'a chain of events'¹¹-a similarity of causative factors earlier noted by Ethiopian Airlines as it grounded all Max 8 aircraft-to which Boeing seemed to have paid little heed-indicating this was a preventable accident-since by its own admission it had received clear signals of an impending doom: "pilots have told us"¹², erroneous activation of the MCAS function can add to what is already a high workload environment". In the corporate apology the Boeing CEO¹³ was remorseful: 'We own it and we know how to do it'.

Boeing was humbled in making the pledge to do 'everything possible to

earn and re-earn that trust and confidence from our airline customers and the flying public'¹⁴-which constitutes a prominent self-correction frame in the crisis communication of corporate apology. The remaining rhetorical work was about a frame of reaffirmation of the corporate core values of 'safety, integrity and quality' and of continuing partnership with the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration, U.S. National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and other regulatory agencies worldwide to re-earn that endangered trust¹⁵. The frame of ownership and transcendence is unmistakable in the extended discourse. The company mentioned 'steps underway to avoid future accidents'-admitting the experience as an opportunity for organizational learning. This has been a prolonged crisis for Boeing as the anticipated certification has been best with regulatory difficulties.

In terms of interorganizational tension, it appeared that two sets of uncertainty were to emerge as indicated in the conceptual literature i.e. partnership uncertainty¹⁶ arising from the aircraft maker's technological behavior and 'task uncertainty' explaining the US company's specific tasks relating to the rushed inauguration of software assuming a regulatory role for itself and failure to act on the side of precaution (Bensaou and Venkatraman 1995).

Boeing employed what has been referred to in the emerging crisis communication literature as 'discourse of renewal' (Ulmer 2014) and communication that "emphasizes learning from the crisis, ethical communication, communication that is prospective in nature, and effective organizational rhetoric" (Ulmer 2014; 707-8). It seemed that the post crisis period was preponderantly devoted not to "issues of responsibility, harm, victimage, and blame" but to "a more optimistic discourse that emphasizes moving beyond the crisis, focusing on strong value positions, responsibility to stakeholders, and growth as a result of the crisis"(Ulmer and Sellnow 2002; 361). Ethiopian Airlines and Boeing seemed focused on framing the aviation crisis with a focus on inspiration, empowerment and renewal (Timothy 2002).

Viewed from a contingency angle the two companies were involved in an accommodative or advocative stance at different levels at different phases of

the crises. Ethiopian Airlines was engaged in advocacy in much of the crisis season defending the company and its pilots. While Ethiopian was in the firing line it was indeed engaged in pure selfdefence or advocacy based on ambiguity of the situation in the early days of the crisis based on traditional models of defensive or advocacy public relations. With a change in dynamics Ethiopian was adopting an accommodative stance as it expressed confidence in the Boeing Company despite the tragedy whose causative factor was still under investigation while the technology supplier was in a more a more accommodative stance for most of the crisis period following an early advocacy of the quality of its aircraft. The bilateral communication climate was characterized by a spirit of open dialogue, and enduring partnership and collaboration with Boeing having to face its more numerous publics including Ethiopian Airlines with an accommodative posture in proportion to its global stature, history, visibility and impact. Its communicative humility was both fitting and proper. Despite the reports of pilot role which Boeing subtly described as a factor in ‘a chain of events’ Ethiopian was strategically silent for some time owing perhaps to a host of factors that affect admission of responsibility (Cancel, Michael and Cameron 1999) but did eventually fire back using powerful corporate rhetoric helping to clear the cloud of responsibility.

3. Conclusion

The study sought to understand how companies involved in the indeterminate crises bilaterally behave in the core issue of responsibility attribution as they face significant challenges to their identity, business, credibility and legitimacy. In particular resilience following a crisis and repair and healing are important considerations in which communication strategies have a vital role.

Although many aviation situations have affected organizations, few studies in the crisis management literature seek to understand the international dynamics of such crisis situations (Coombs, 2010).

Often given the complexity of organizational or interorganizational systems and the multiplicity of agents involved and their interactive and intricate roles causative agents may remain unknown for the duration of the initial

period of a catastrophe inviting media speculation and spotlight that may be damaging irrespective of the veracity of the explanations by the rushed press.

The crisis communication represented an uncommon experience interorganizationally involving as it did two companies representing respectively the Global North and the Global South with evident gaps in technical development levels. While Ethiopian Airlines was a victim itself initial accounts were based on stereotypes reflecting corporate bodies of the developing world. Ethiopian had to counter all the initial publicity damage through respect for crisis communication protocol as well as rhetorical framing of aspects of the aviation disaster. It followed global aviation accident communication protocol (IATA 2019) emphasizing factual communication. In line with ITA recommendations EAL was engaged in communication of sympathy, the flight, the aircraft, actions taken (in terms of information and assistance), crew, passengers, training and overhaul-relating projected in diverse macro and microframes expressed generically as deny, diminish and deal strategies and corresponding frames. Ethiopian Airlines communication lasted from the day of the crash until the reporting of the crash investigation team which cleared the flag carrier from responsibility. Rhetorical framing was mobilized to protect the vulnerable position of the African company as facts alone would not suffice to forestall undue reputational damage. Interorganizationally Ethiopian Airlines had high minded frames of shared values of safety, dependability and service, while it was also in selfdefence as a dependable third world company able to swim against the current.

For Boeing the crisis communication was overlong and untypical every move followed by a countermove. The world wide grounding of the MAX 8 was a significant damage although communications announced a resumption of flights plan, a software update, pilot training, pilot simulations and software manuals which failed to materialize on schedule¹⁷. The crisis communication was further complicated by new flows in MCAS update and more damaging publicity about the initial rushed entry of the Boeing 737 MAX in violation of standard procedures.

Boeing's behavior seemed to point to a diagnosis of corporate recidivism and in consequence trust repair was difficult to accomplish in the context of failed promises for a quick technical correctional process and corporate recovery. Two of the core values espoused by Boeing are very high standards of integrity and safety: The accident comes as a test of that commitment to safety in view of the standards that were compromised in the certification and the rush to start flights without the groundwork necessary to keep avowed safety standards through extensive testing, training and certification. (*"We value human life and well-being above all else and take action accordingly. We believe all incidents, injuries and workplace illnesses are preventable"*¹⁸). The human life frame was emphasized by Boeing in all its press statements that framed the accident in terms of a human tragedy and the pain of loss of life.

Indeed initial crisis response strategies subsume expressions of appropriate organizational emotion on account of victims of a crisis and their friends and loved ones. In the aviation sector, victims are passengers and crew killed and their families and friends are the ones that deserve expression of condolences at this difficult initial phase of shock in the crisis season. Scholars have indicated that expressions of sympathy serve to lessen reputational harm to an entity involved in a crisis (Kellerman 2006; Dean 2004). While expression of sympathy can appear fatigue communication they do send a clear signal of appropriate conduct in organizational communication. According to Hareli and Eisikovits (2006), corporate apologies characterized by genuineness and humility will have an emotive force able to calm down victims. An expression of sympathy is also likely to neutralize the negative affective tone of relationships between a party held responsible and its victims (Cohen 1999). Lukaszewski (2012: 211) underscores the moral power of victimhood and the need for corporate communications to provide healing through 'validation, visibility, vindication, and extreme empathy/apology' to help them come to terms with their grief and loss. Negative crisis communication strategies of denial and blame shifting can only serve to cause more damage to the entity by denying validation that victims deserve the most.

Crisis communication practices by Boeing and Ethiopian Airlines were not

exactly the same in view of their differing levels of involvement and share of responsibility as well as the media scrutiny that had a differential focus. But they also employed similar strategies as they addressed the crisis felt by their stakeholders. Thus in common, both expressed sympathy to grieving families and friends of those who lost their lives in the tragedy. But due to the differences in attribution of crisis responsibility attendant practices differed. Thus given Boeing's receiving predominant scrutiny it was in duty bound to have to focus affectively on the victims in the Indonesian and Ethiopian MAX 8 tragedies.

As a result of strong attributions of crisis responsibility the multinational company offered an apology and then, albeit much later, a compensation package¹⁹. For Ethiopian much less was required in terms of Coom's (2007b) strategies. For crises with low attributions of crisis responsibility and no intensifying factors, as was pertinent to the role of Ethiopian Airlines all that was required was provide a full justification of the role of the carrier in the accident. Ethiopian did not express any apology although in some quarters the pilots were described as having a role in terms of their speed which was considered too high but disputed by others as being a consequence of the software involved in the accident.

Ethiopian did use 'denial and attack the accuser strategies' to confront the media speculation that pilot error and training were factors in the crash. It was able to dispel the rumors by posting online the flight records of the pilots and the training they underwent based on Boeing's own recommendations. Contrary wise Boeing made little reference to media reports of corporate scandals choosing a silence strategy as a rarely used tool in crisis communication.

The findings of the interorganizational crisis communication strategies indicate that the two companies differed in their framing of the crisis, in their reaction to media reports of culpability, but they also attempted to be transcendent focusing on the bigger picture of aviation safety and the need for safety improvements. They also bonded at the crisis juncture which was important to meet the challenge and contain the crisis as little would be

served in the sensitive business environment in stating an acrimonious narrative blaming the other. Boeing was from the start intent that the EAL would require assistance which they deployed as part of the investigation into the crash.

While the crisis for Ethiopian was shorter running the course once the technical details of the crash exonerated the company, inter-organizational communication was largely evident in press releases of Boeing with continuing references to the victims of the tragedy and outpouring of expressions of sympathy and a compensation package. Ethiopian Airlines discounted reports that the pilots were partly to blame but these were not mentioned in Boeing's press communications. The focus of Boeing was on the uphill struggle toward the recertification of the Max whose grounding has caused unforeseen global aviation disruption and unprecedented loss for many carriers both financially and reputationally severely challenging Boeing itself.

4. Study contributions and implications

The study has important contributions and implications for theory, research, policy and practice in corporate crisis communication.

Research

The study adds to the global body of knowledge on the aviation business and the hazards of loss and communications functions in the management of reputational risks. In particular the study addresses the under-researched stream of inter-corporate crisis events when corporate entities are asymmetrical in terms of country of origin parameters.

The empirical evidence seems to indicate that inter-corporate crisis communication may be impacted by a country's level of development which can have consequences for perceptions of culpability especially when plain evidence of responsibility is unavailable or any evidence available is marred by competing claims. The allegations against the Ethiopian carrier represent a shifting of the burden of proof which is technically an argument from

ignorance which happens when a proposition of culpability is accepted to be true because it has not been proved to be false –which tallies with low standards of evidence.

Thus we see evidence that early media speculations about Ethiopia' Airlines were based on mental shortcuts and cognitive flaws propelling an expectation that the less technically advanced party would be blameworthy in attribution assessments. As a consequence Ethiopian Airlines was the subject of media reports of culpability even before the facts were established through appropriate technical procedures recommended by the International Aviation body International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). In particular the study provides evidence base in the under-researched inter-corporate crisis event when corporate entities are asymmetrical in terms of country of origin parameters.

The prejudgments in the press propelled EAL crisis response to appear an overreaction as the company's communications suggested the use of intimidation strategy while Boeing chose silence or sophisticated rhetoric to diffuse the mounting pressure in regard to its culpability. The Ethiopian Airlines response also shows how reaction is shaped by a combination of country specific and inter-corporate realities. In particular the siege mentality is understandable as EAL –a government entity-has to grapple with the stiffly competitive aviation market and live up to expectations and continue the tradition of a perhaps singular Ethiopian corporate success story stretching seven decades as well as being Africa's largest carrier symbolizing the continent's collective aspirations.

Methodology

The study offers new insights not reported by previous studies most particularly the use of rhetorical criticism as being capable of unraveling nuances in the data not detectable using other conventional theories of contingency and situational crisis communication and attendant methodologies. Further the use of the discourse of renewal by Boeing has implications and promise for methodological orientations in crisis communication research.

Practice

In the global media reports on EA's culpability in the aviation tragedy, a series of reports in the Washington Post and New York Times attributed to a source that was quoted widely as having forewarned EA to provide training before the accident was able to gain currency. There were other former employees presenting versions of their own on TV and social media but critical enough to cause corporate reputational harm. These sources point to a possible intraorganizational conflict which serves to inform how intraorganizational bickering can harm inter-corporate crisis communication by exposing corporate failures real or imagined. Internal employee focused public relations and engagement needs to be stressed as a strategic priority as internal rifts can hamper corporate communication efforts and threaten corporate reputation.

Theory

Theoretically the framework employed is multiperspectival involving three different paradigms. Each theoretical perspective helps to offer unique insights not captured by the other. Thus the theories guiding the study have offered helpful perspectives in understanding and explaining inter-corporate crisis communication involving two companies from two fundamentally differing nations from a development viewpoint. These may be understood from micro (corporate) and macro (country) levels. For instance the rhetorical tradition in both countries is differently reflected in the communication of the two corporate bodies with differing levels of sophistication. The rich American tradition of rhetoric is evident in Boeing's elevated outgoing communications. This differential has implications for interorganizational learning as well as theorising. The need for a relevant theory addressing asymmetry effects is indicated beyond the existing frameworks bias in attributions.

Policy

In terms of corporate communication policy the findings suggest the need for a rigorous internal communication audit that can dispel potential issues that spillover into external corporate relations. In the present study several media reports about internal issues were reported in the years preceding the aviation crisis. These were able to at least temporarily put more strain on the company struggling to set the record straight. Corporate communication

management therefore needs to address the communication threats online and offline nationally and internationally that can hamper corporate efforts aimed at achieving or maintaining continental and international standing.

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End notes

¹For instance, on May 15, 2019, Republican U.S. Representative Sam Graves during a House Committee on Transportation & Infrastructure hearing regarding the 737 MAX status stated: “For me, the accident reports reaffirm my belief that pilots trained in the United States would have successfully handled the situation. The reports compound my concerns about quality training standards in other countries”. The senator’s premature assessment is predicted by social identity theory that attributions of responsibility are guided by ego protective and ego bolstering assignments of blame to an out-group that may however be impeccable in performance (Hong & Yang, 2011; Noorderhaven & Harzing, 2003).

² Under a head line “Boeing pushed the Federal Aviation Authority (FAA) to relax 737 MAX certification requirements for crew alerts”, the *Seattle Times* reported that “Boeing convinced the FAA to relax safety standards for cockpit alerts on the 737 MAX.” adding “Boeing rejected 737 MAX safety upgrades before fatal crashes, whistleblower says”. Retrieved September 2, 2019 from <https://www.seattletimes.com/tag/737-max/>.

³ “Ethiopian Airlines would like to refute the following wrong reporting of the New York Times titled “Ethiopian Airlines Had a Max 8 Simulator, but Pilot on Doomed Flight Didn’t Receive Training” Retrieved June 21 2019 from <https://www.ethiopianairlines.com/corporate/media/media-relations/press-release/detail/1089>

⁴ Bloomberg reported that an ex-pilot had warned the Ethiopian flag carrier long before the crash about the need for more pilot training on the MAX 8 which Ethiopian Airlines categorically dismissed as an absurd story by a fired former employee with a history of grave professional and disciplinary problems. A second former employee seeking asylum in the US told the American Federal Aviation Administration : “The brutal fact shall be exposed ... Ethiopian Airlines is pursuing the vision of expansion, growth and profitability by compromising safety”, to which report the company reacted : “He is a disgruntled ex-employee who fabricated a false story about Ethiopian Airlines, partly to revenge for his demotion while working in Ethiopian, and partly to probably develop a case to secure asylum in the USA,” the airline said in an email to AP. “We would like to confirm once more that all his allegations are false and baseless.” (AP, Sept. 23, 2019). Irrespective of their veracity these reports seemed to gain currency because they tallied with Boeing’s insinuation about the Ethiopian carrier’s pilot competency issues.

⁵“Ethiopian Airlines to Sue US-based Newspapers for Publishing Fake News” retrieved June 4, 2019 from Ethiopian News Agency <https://www.ena.et/en/?p=6958>

⁶ EAL press release noted: “The crews were well trained on this aircraft.....“Immediately after the crash and owing to the similarity with the Lion Air Accident, we grounded our fleet of Max 8s. Within days, the plane had been grounded around the world. I fully support this. Until we have answers, putting one more life at risk is too much”.

⁷Overall the interorganizational persuasive discourse was strategically produced on two fronts with dual goals that ‘emphasize-the-positive’ strategy and ‘neutralize-the-negative’ framework ’aimed at trust rebuilding (Fuoli and Hart 2018, 520).

⁸In a press statement EA CEO wrote: “Let me be clear: Ethiopian Airlines believes in Boeing. They have been a partner of ours for many years. More than two-thirds of our fleet is Boeing. We were the first African airline to fly the 767, 757, 777-200LR, and we were the second nation in the world (after Japan) to take delivery of the 787 Dreamliner.”

⁹ Boeing CEO said: “...., Ethiopian represents the pride and progress of a great people and a symbol of The New Spirit of Africa. We are all humbled and learning from this experience. We’ve stood shoulder to shoulder in partnership with the Ethiopian team to grieve and extend our deepest sympathies to the families, friends and communities of the passengers and crew. With a shared value of safety, be assured that we are bringing all of the resources of The Boeing Company to bear, working together tirelessly to understand what happened and do everything possible to ensure it doesn’t happen again. All of us thank Ethiopian Airlines for their commitment and share their resolve to doing everything possible to build an even safer air travel system”.

¹⁰ The aviation outlet *FlightGlobal* issued the headline “Ethiopian crew struggled with manual trim at overspeed “, adding “Pilots of the ill-fated Ethiopian Boeing 737 Max 8 allowed the aircraft to fly beyond its maximum operating limit speed, which may have contributed to the difficulties experienced with attempts to trim the aircraft. Retrieved September 12, 2019 from <https://www.flightglobal.com/news/articles/ethiopian-crew-struggled-with-manual-trim-at-overspe-457282/>

¹¹ A more balanced report is presented in BBC’s production “Battle over blame; Ethiopian Airlines rejects accusations of pilot error”. Retrieved August 23, 2019 from:https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/extra/sd9LGK2S9m/battle_over_blame#group-pilot-error-SsHD9mVHO

¹² “Pilots complained about the 737 Max in a federal database” (CNN March 13, 2019). Retrieved August 5, 2019 from :<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/03/13/us/pilot-complaints-boeing-737-max/index.html>

¹³ However the CEO did insinuate that Ethiopian pilots were to blame in part which led Ethiopian Airlines to ask rhetorically “If the accident was caused by pilot error then why has the whole world grounded the Max 8?”. Similarly the American Pilots Union rebuked Boeing for blaming the Ethiopian pilots (CNN report ‘Pilots union to Boeing: ‘Inexcusable’ to blame pilots for 737 Max crashes’ May 23, 2019).

¹⁴ Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg Addresses the Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 Preliminary Report retrieved September 4, 2019 from <https://boeing.mediaroom.com/2019-04-04-Boeing-CEO-Dennis-Muilenburg-Addresses-the-Ethiopian-Airlines-Flight-302-Preliminary-Report>

¹⁵ A corporate body is dependent on the trust levels it engenders to sustain its business survival (Poppo and Schepker, 2010). In the otherwise sensitive aviation business it is important for the planemaker and flier to display adequate levels of competence, benevolence and integrity (Xie and Peng, 2009) to shareholders, customers, and passengers.

¹⁶ Ethiopian Airlines CEO was quoted as saying Ethiopian Airlines would be the last carrier in the world to unground the MAX 8 aircraft

¹⁷ Shepardson, D. 2019 (April 16). Boeing 737 MAX software upgrades 'operationally suitable': FAA panel.

¹⁸ Boeing vision statement retrieved October 1, 2019 from <https://www.boeing.com/principles/vision.page>

¹⁹ As the crisis dragged on pilots also demanded compensation on account of business loss.