In the network landscape, information and communication technologies (ICTs) and social media have tended to become increasingly important tools in the strategic communicator’s toolbox (see, e.g., Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2009; Verhoeven, Tench, Zerfass, Moreno, & Verčič, 2012; Waters, Tindall, & Timothy, 2010). Due to the possibilities presented by communication technology, new work methods for and approaches to crisis communication have emerged (see, e.g., Eriksson, 2009; 2012; González-Herrero, & Smith, 2008, 2010; Hallahan, 2009; Hughes, & Palen, 2012). Via social media, many organizations today communicate with their surroundings in a more undirected and situation-oriented way through which the perception of a crisis is developed in interaction with the user. These working methods tend to be in line with the “new” late modern and/or postmodern crisis management perspectives, which argue that modern crisis managers have to improve their ability to improvise (see, e.g., Czarniawska, 2009; Gilpin, & Murphy, 2006, 2008, 2010; Weick, & Sutcliffe, 2007). Watchwords like control and steering in crisis communication have tended to become passé, or are at least changing in the networked world (see, e.g., Liu, Palen, Sutton, Hughes, & Vieweg, 2009; Palen, Vieweg, Liu, & Hughes, 2009; Wigley & Fontenot, 2010). The question is how crisis communicators’ attitudes toward previously developed crisis management plans and strategies change in such a context. What happens to the strategy logic—with its roots in the military sphere—that has so long characterized the field of crisis management when the communicator is forced to improvise to an ever-increasing degree?

The research on strategic communication and social media in a crisis communication context is only in its infancy. Although the research is not extensive, several researchers in crisis management, public relations, marketing, and informatics proclaim that the greatest thing about social media and the Internet from the organization’s point of view is the possibility to work with issues and knowledge management for signal detections and analysis of opinions and public behavior in potential crisis situations (see, e.g., Eysenbach, 2009; González-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Palenchar & Freberg, 2012; Wang & Belardo, 2009). Some researchers in marketing, such as Cova and White (2010), on the contrary, argue that social media mainly opens up dangerous possibilities for consumers to develop potential opposition. They conclude that online grouping generates “alter brands and counter brands that present opportunities and threats for existing brand managers” (p. 256). However, research is still lacking discussions of how this user-generated and situation-oriented communication landscape affects possibilities for those practitioners who need to apply traditional strategies, plans, and tactics in their strategic crisis communication.
The aim of this chapter is, therefore, to analyze and examine the role of classic crisis management strategy, planning, and tactics in a digital landscape of crisis communication, where far too rigid plans and guidelines seem to risk tying the hands of the crisis communicator. The chapter presents a qualitative case study of Scandinavian Airlines’ work with social media in their crisis communication during the eruptions of the Icelandic volcano, Eyjafjallajökull, and the following closure of most of Europe’s airspace from 15 to 20 April 2010. This chapter’s main research questions are: (a) how did the involved crisis communicators combine today’s possibilities for improvisation (via social media) with drilled strategies, tactics, action patterns and routines? And (b) how can we understand the concepts of classical strategy, planning and tactics in this new crisis communication context?

**Strategy, Crisis Communication and Improvisation**

Traditional concepts of strategy, planning and tactics have to be partly rephrased in the light of recent knowledge about crisis management and crisis communication. A short reflection on these concepts highlights the need for improvisation in modern crisis communication.

**Defining Strategy, Planning and Tactics**

The history of the concept of *strategy* is long and multifaceted, with a wide range of applications in politics, military and business (see, e.g., Gilbert, Hartman, Mauriel, & Freeman, 1988; Liddell Hart, 1967; Mintzberg, 1987; Schelling, 1960). Broadly stated, strategy is, in its original meaning, the planning, coordination, and general direction of military operations to meet overall military objectives. Strategy originally signified purely military planning and it comes from the Greek *strategos*, which means “the art of the general.” From this point of view, strategy is an action or plan—with clear military roots and logic—to handle a specific situation and to achieve certain specific goals. To equate strategy with concrete management plans and planning is also the most common way to consider the strategy concept in the field of strategic communication. As Smith (2005) states: “strategy is the heart of planning for public relations, marketing communication and related areas” (p. 67). According to this view, strategy is a management function, which includes the mapping of the organization’s course toward its overall destination, and the development of the organization and its strategic communications goals and objectives. In this approach, the general role of strategy is to guide the organization’s members in their work. Another dimension of the classical view of strategy is the use of tactics. From the military point of view, *tactics* is the application of strategy at a field level (Liddell Hart, 1967). Recontextualizing the military definition, tactics are the more visible elements of public relations, marketing communication or crisis communication. Tactics include the use of a variety of “weapons”, such as different media channels and messages, to reach the public.

The concepts of strategy, planning and tactics are, however, not clearly differentiated in the wide range of organizational management and communication management research. Sometimes the terms are equated with one another, and sometimes they are regarded as different steps in a single work process. The most common view is, however, that strategy is a result of good management planning: that is, that strategy is a consequence of planning. Mintzberg (1987, 2000) and Mintzberg and McHugh (1985) argued, however, for an alternative view of strategy and strategic planning. Mintzberg contended that the traditional view of senior managers planning detailed strategies (senior managers formulating courses of action that everyone else would implement) should be replaced with an approach where, instead, the organization’s members *craft strategy*. This approach differs considerably from the classical strategy perspective in that craft “evokes traditional skill, dedication, perfection through the mastery of detail” (1987, p. 66). The craftsmen are involved and have a feeling of intimacy with the material at hand, and they develop their skills through long and extensive experience. Therefore, Mintzberg argued, from his alternative...
perspective on strategy, that: “(1) strategies are both plans for the future and patterns from the past; (2) strategies need not be deliberate—they can also emerge; (3) effective strategies develop in all kinds of strange ways; (4) to manage strategy is to craft thought and action, control and learning, stability and change” (Mintzberg, 1987, p. 67–73).

The Classical Approach to Strategic Crisis Management and Crisis Communication

Based on the military slant on the functions in management and bureaucracy of strategy, planning, and tactics, the classical approach to strategic crisis management and crisis communication has been developed. According to Gilpin and Murphy (2006; 2008; 2010), the classical approach to crisis management, in brief, is based on three categories of proposition that are taken for granted; these are: (a) specific philosophical assumptions, (b) assumptions about the organization, and (c) assumptions about crisis management. In short, the philosophical assumptions are characterized by the belief that it is possible to control events and the perception of events with the right kind of communication and actions. A typical assumption about the organization is that it is like a mechanical system, with clear boundaries between itself and its external environment. From this point of view, an organization and its crisis communicators are considered as the center of crisis communication with a view of communication as transmission and the organization as the transmitter. Another important element of this traditional approach is that the first aim of crisis management is to limit the loss of organizational resources as quickly as possible through restoration of organizational reputation and legitimacy. To adapt well to its environment, an organization should learn as much as possible of that same environment through research and issue management. The traditional approach is also based on assumptions colored by bureaucratic management logic, with a focus on top-down control and decision chains in an organization (Gilpin & Murphy, 2006; 2008; 2010). In practice, traditional crisis managers centralize information and decision-making in a smaller crisis management team or a single press officer (see, e.g., Kauffman, 1999). Also of great importance in the classical approach is following prepared crisis plans when time-sensitive and stressful situations are to be handled. The idea is that stressed crisis managers should act reflexively when a real crisis occurs. The main aim of crisis exercises and training is, therefore, to test whether or not the plans are well rehearsed (Falkheimer & Heide, 2010).

The New Approach to Strategic Crisis Management and Crisis Communication

There are, however, several researchers in crisis management who suggest that the classical approach to strategy, with its rigid focus on planning and control, can be destructive. Classical crisis plans are criticized as being fanciful, rather than reality-based (Clarke, 1999), and McConnell and Drennan (2006) argue that it is “mission impossible” to take control of today’s crises through rigorous planning. The need for a new approach to crisis management and crisis communications is relatively broadly stated and the need for fewer written plans and routine exercises is emphasized. Instead, mental preparation and learning processes are proposed for those working with crisis management in practice (Falkheimer & Heide, 2010; Robert & Lajtha, 2002). In the field of public relations, Gilpin and Murphy (2006) argue, for example, that too much planning and detailed guidance in a crisis “narrow[s] the vision [. . . ]rather than expands it” (p. 376). Inspired by Weick’s theory of organization enactment (1988, 1993), and theories of chaos and complexity (Richardson & Cilliers, 2001; Murphy, 1996), Gilpin and Murphy highlight the need for a change from the current dominant approach to crisis management because it “attempts to eliminate or control ambiguity, paradox and uncertainty rather than accept these as unavoidable and uncontrollable characteristics inherent in our world” (2006, p. 379). Instead, they argue for a new crisis management/crisis communication
paradigm working with improvisation and chaos as underlying forces. The new approach to crisis management and crisis communication necessitates not only greater daring in abandoning controlling plans, but also an understanding of the need for a style of crisis organization and communication that develops in symbiosis with the particular crisis at hand (see also Czarniawska, 2009; Falkheimer & Heide, 2010; Holder, 2004; McConnell, & Drennan, 2006).

Modern, strategic crisis managers and communicators, inspired by the “new” approach, are urged to look at the work models within improvisational theater for the ideal logic (see, e.g. Finch & Welker, 2004). With neither a script nor a preordained, rehearsed series of actions to provide reassuring support and guidance, the theater ensemble using improv successfully navigates a challenging, spontaneous theatrical journey: “[I]mprovisation expands participants’ abilities to perceive and reduces the need for intense and specific scripted preparation” (2004, p. 192). The idea is that the organization’s and the crisis communicator’s ability to improvise and to take action in a crisis can be trained much like the abilities of a theater ensemble—all in the name of finding the best work methods for a particular situation rather than following the rules, directions and plans that characterized the classic crisis communication logic. Modern crisis managers think, therefore, that it is impossible to center crisis communication in a single person or a crisis management team; instead, the crisis communication revolves around networks of several co-operating crisis communicators. He or she prefers interpersonal communication and micro communication, conducted directly with smaller audiences, to mass communication with a broader public (Falkheimer & Heide, 2009). Another characteristic of the modern crisis manager is the notion that total control and totally uniform messages in crisis communication constitute a utopia. Finally, the modern “new” approach is characterized by a view that the organization’s crisis training is not done to test proposed strategies and plans; instead, the aim is to get crisis managers used to uncertainty and chaos (Gilpin & Murphy, 2006; 2008; 2010).

The Case of Scandinavian Airlines (SAS)

This section presents a case study of SAS’s experiences of social media use in their crisis communication during the eruption of the Icelandic volcano, Eyjafjallajökull, in Spring 2010. After the crisis, SAS won the SimpliFlying Awards of Excellence award for the best use of social media in crisis communication. The award honored SAS’s work to provide their customers with information via Facebook during the period of five days in April when flight traffic in large parts of Europe was canceled. The case of SAS was chosen as a valuable focus for study because of the way in which the organization and its practitioners experienced the new phenomenon of social media in strategic crisis communication. The empirical material was collected from six qualitative interviews with the head of corporate emergency response planning, the head of online communication, public relations officers, marketing managers, and staff working with customer relations and other strategic communication functions at the company. All the respondents had, in different ways, worked with social media as a tool in the company’s crisis communication during the period of the ash cloud crisis.

The analytical work used an abductive research logic (see Dubois & Gadde, 2002) where prevailing concepts such as Mintzberg’s (1987) view of strategy as crafting and Gilpin and Murphy’s (2006; 2008; 2010) “new” approach to crisis management initiate questions and comparisons pertaining to the current phenomenon of crisis communication using social media. The study focuses, therefore, on the specific circumstances of crisis communication with social media, based on “classical” and “new” assumptions and directions about crisis management and crisis communication strategy. In particular, it identifies a number of tensions between the visions of classical and new approaches for crisis management and crisis communication, and the realities of crisis work using social media. The research logic was not to prejudice these a priori hypotheses; instead these non-formulated hypotheses guided the study’s analytical work from the outset (see e.g., Layder, 1993). The aim was
to organize new concepts about the realities for strategic crisis management and crisis communication in the context of social media. After the interviews, in a first analytical step, the material was grouped into three descriptive and analytical themes: (a) organizing, (b) messages and tactics, and (c) emergence of (new) structures. The thematic categorization was based on themes from the theoretical framework, the interview questions, and the crisis communication practitioners’ experiences expressed during the interviews.

**SAS’s Experiences of Social Media Use in Crisis Communication**

**Organization**

When the ash cloud crisis occurred, social media was not a prior channel for crisis management and crisis communication at SAS. Before the crisis, the director of online strategy and communications had begun to plan how the company could possibly handle the social media flows of information in future, extraordinary situations. She had, among other things, started to arrange a solution where the company’s already existing phone-based customer service could also answer questions asked by customers and others on Facebook. This service had, however, not started, when the ash cloud traffic disruption occurred. Instead, at this time, she started to organize the crisis communication after she had had her attention drawn to the expanding discussions of the issue on Facebook. Several practitioners interviewed in this study argued that it was customers’ needs that set the pace and the agenda in this initial phase of the crisis:

“If we hadn’t had a page, we might have chosen not to start one. But we saw now that there was a need. So we started completely based on the customer. We realized that we simply couldn’t shut the channel down just because we weren’t ready yet [. . .] We absolutely couldn’t shut down and say that we didn’t have time to answer. There was such a huge need.

Project manager, customer relations

During the first hours, the director of online strategy and communications ran the company’s Facebook conversation on her own. But she soon realized she needed help to handle the increasing number of issues. She asked two colleagues from other communication-related departments in the company for help. The two colleagues were experienced Facebook users:

[She] chose us mainly because she knew that we hung out on Facebook. We were quite familiar with the language—it’s important that you use the right language and approach. And we were fast. And we were hungry and curious. And above all fearless.

Project manager, customer relations

That she called me was probably because I had helped before at certain times with portals and so on and was there as a resource. It was a coincidence. I don’t think we had a plan. I think it just happened. After that, we improvised while it happened.

Head of internal online communication

In this initial phase of the crisis, there were no emergency and/or crisis management plans, and so forth, to dictate who should work with the company’s online crisis communication on Facebook. Instead, the choice of co-workers was related to previous experience of the medium. An important criterion in the selection of people was also that they would have the confidence to act and communicate without detailed guidance. Step by step, in the second phase of the crisis, more skills were added to the team. The new team members were people with expertise in fields such as legal issues, repayments, travel guarantees. At most, five people worked together at the same time. In the
evenings, nights and early mornings, the members in the Facebook team worked from home. The team interacted with each other and organized their work via Skype and through an internal company blog. Using these communication tools, they also sought answers to customers’ questions by contacting internal colleagues. The daytime work was at an office in the company’s communication department. The team members were assigned different roles by the head of online communication: “We had different roles in the room [. . . . ] I was in charge of all communication and decided what was what. That we used all channels. I coordinated the message and had a coordinating role” (head of online strategy and communication).

Overall crisis communication through social media was, however, only indirectly controlled by the organization’s predetermined crisis management plans and routines, even though the head of online communication tried to organize the work and give it some structure: “We never mentioned the emergency file or that we could take something from it and apply it directly to this” (head of internal online communication). Instead, the routines and patterns that characterized the work grew more in interaction with incoming questions and the nature of the discussions in the social media: “The work wasn’t structured—it was created there and then and it worked. It was ‘try and seek.’ Calling it a new paradigm is to exaggerate—but for us it was a change” (head of corporate emergency response planning).

These more improvised working methods were perceived as a success, although some of the team members also faced a problem in the sense that pre-established plans, guidelines and manuals were overlooked: “I am the kind of person who likes checklists so that everyone knows what to do. That’s not what it was like. [. . .] Next time I hope we use the file more” (head of internal online communication).

**Messages and Tactics**

Initially, customers and other incoming queries almost exclusively set the message agenda on Facebook. Even if the head of online communication tried to coordinate the communication, in the initial phase of the crisis the co-workers were forced to act quickly and under uncertainty when they answered Facebook users’ questions. The unspoken goal that emerged during the work was to provide the most prompt information service possible. But gradually, from the company’s strategic point of view, more coordinated messages were delivered through social media:

In the beginning it was very much about responding to questions. But as our colleagues around the world got organized, arranged buses, fixed alternative routes and so on, they phoned us. The station manager in Madrid could call and let us know that they had five coaches. “Can you go on Facebook and tell them that they leave from the station and on to . . .” Towards the end, or in the middle, once we had organized alternative routes, we started using targeted messages.

*Head of internal online communication*

In the second phase of the crisis, message tactics emerged that advocated that a single crisis communicator at the company should deliver short uncomplicated, concise and positive Facebook messages. The team who normally worked with customer relations introduced the tactics. Using such tactics it was, according to the interviewees, quite often possible to reach the underlying goal, which was to take command of the forthcoming discussions:

We were very good at closing discussions. We had help from Customer Relations. “Try closing the discussion! So that topics don’t get too long because people refuse to give up!”

*Head of internal online communication*
At its worst, of course the customer is in control. You can’t consider your responses. At the same time, I think we had an enormous amount of influence because we had the very explicit idea of not getting hooked by customers and trying to turn something negative into positive. And not focusing on the small stuff. We gave customers alternatives and focused on making it positive. So I think that on the whole we were in control. We’ve got lots of concrete examples where we had negative flows which we totally turned.

*Project manager, customer relations*

Another emerging tactic was that the messages should have an informal and personal touch, as it was considered as appropriate in social media: “We must get rid of the formalities—we can’t sit and write ‘Dear customer’ on Facebook—it doesn’t fit!” (Project manager, customer relations). And, to avoid distributing old information and to transfer some of the liability for the Facebook content, the team used web links to other web pages in their messages. Using hypertext links to Scandinavian Airlines’ everyday web pages, they tried to provide updated information about cancelled flights:

When we provided information, we didn’t always have concrete answers—but we tried to refer people to pages on the web site. If they, for example, asked about buses, we had a page we could link to and that page was constantly being updated. If they had questions about rebooking, we linked to that. We always gave the impression that we were helping and that we cared. We tried not to write specifically that there would be a bus at a certain. Because, before you knew it, everything changed.

*Project manager, customer relations*

The co-workers in the Facebook team played, so to speak, the role of guides in the Internet flow of information concerning the ash cloud crisis; guides who, to some degree, tried to influence the image of the crisis through their choice of messages.

*The Emergence of (New) Structures*

The use of social media in crisis communication, however, shapes new patterns and structures in crisis management. One such structure identified in the case study was that the crisis communicators thought they should be more informal and spontaneous in their communication because the information communicated through Facebook was not published on the company’s formal website. Therefore, on the company’s Facebook group page, both reputation-oriented and company-verified information was presented side by side:

It was quite good. They were the ones posting on the page. We weren’t responsible for it. And everyone knew that as well. This is from Kalle and SAS is not to be held accountable . . . So we never had to check info. If you want to take Kalle’s advice, that’s entirely up to you. It’s not something we published. And that was good. It didn’t take the time we usually need to check up on things.

*Head of internal online communication*

Thus, Facebook came to be a forum for the SAS Group’s own employees who, for various reasons, needed to communicate and keep themselves informed about how the crisis was evolving. The reason was that the reputation-oriented information on Facebook, to some degree, stayed ahead of the information on the company’s website: “Actually, eventually there was more up-to-date information on Facebook than on the website. We’re a large group and it was more complex to update all our sites” (project manager, customer relations). Through the medium’s ability to establish instant
communities and blur the boundaries between the internal and external, a strong positive feeling of cohesion developed around the common problems, according to the crisis communicators involved:

A pilot, who had been stranded in Chicago, could write “I’ll just tie my tie, get to the airport and fly you home.” And someone would respond “God, that’s great/good.” Everyone became friends; there was a great feeling of community. With our employees around the world. Everyone thought it was a blast to be able to help.

Head of internal online communication

These developments were seen mostly as positive. But the crisis communicators involved were also, paradoxically, concerned about internal issues being mixed with public issues.

Discussion

The case study shows some structural concepts and trends that pave the way to a new understanding of crisis communication in the landscape of social media. The key insights might be summarized in three theses.

1. Crisis Management Using Social Media Highlights Important Tensions Between Old and New Approaches for Crisis Management and Crisis Communication

According to the case presented in this chapter, crisis communication practitioners working in the digital landscape are forced to accept ambiguity and uncertainty to a higher degree than before. With access to social media, they are also willing to improvise to a higher degree than they might have done earlier. Such improvisation takes place both when they are organizing the work, and when they are choosing the messages in their crisis communication. However, despite this higher level of improvisation, paradoxically, some assumptions connected to the classical approach to crisis management influence the practitioners’ view of best practice in crisis communication (see González-Herrero & Smith, 2010). The practice of crisis communication including social media tends, therefore, to emerge in an interaction between the standards and ideals belonging to the classical perspective on crisis communication (such as the need for clear boundaries between internal and external, clearly defined roles and centralization of decision making and message design to pre-established crisis management teams) and assumptions related to the digital age, such as instant communities, cross-bordering timeless networks and relentless connectivity.

2. Crisis Management Using Social Media Develops the Need for a New Metaphor for the Understanding and Practice of Future Crisis Communication

A crisis manager and/or crisis communicator from the classical normative crisis management point of view can metaphorically be seen as a commander-in-chief. Such a crisis communicator is likened to an authoritative military figure fighting for control over the flow of information. In the digital age, this normative metaphor for best practice of crisis communication seems to be under transformation. On the one hand, today’s crisis communicators still use social media to seek to control and direct the image of the organization and of a particular crisis. But on the other hand, this “new” crisis communicator communicates, paradoxically, in a more decentralized, undirected and user-generated manner when he or she adapts to the digital network society’s expectations and possibilities for a more user-driven communication. Such a digital age practitioner of crisis management and crisis
Mats Eriksson

communication could metaphorically be described as an *improvising real-time director*. In Grunig’s (see, e.g., L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) terms, such a metaphor can be considered as a “mixed motive” approach where asymmetrical logics and practices are combined with more symmetrical ones. Hopefully, such a metaphor for understanding crisis work in the digital age can be useful from several perspectives. First, for researchers who want to understand the phenomenon of strategic crisis communication in a new way. Second, for crisis communication practitioners in need of appropriate new working approaches and logics.

3. Crisis Management Using Social Media Highlights the Need for a Redefinition of the Concept of Strategy in Strategic Communication and Crisis Communication

Phillips and Young (2009) argued that both researchers and practitioners in the field of public relations and strategic communication are in need of “new ways in which communications strategies can be re-evaluated, redefined and developed in order to succeed” (p. 136) in the age of social media. One way, according to this study, is to complement or redefine the classical viewpoint of strategy with one that accepts higher levels of uncertainty than have erstwhile been accepted in the field. Such an understanding of strategy was, as already mentioned, favored by Mintzberg in the 1980s when he claimed that effective strategies evolved “in the strangest places and develop[ed] through the most unexpected means” (1987, p. 70), rather than in the course of careful planning at the top management level. Mintzberg also argued that these are effective “grass-roots” strategies or crafting strategies wherever people have the capacity to learn. Also typical for such crafting of strategy is, according to Mintzberg, the combination of “deliberation and control with flexibility and organizational learning” (1987, p. 70). With such a broad view of strategy in the crisis management context, opportunities for a complementary framework for understanding successful management in crisis communication within social media are created. It is a framework that highlights crisis managers’ and crisis communicators’ own experience, commitments, and abilities to improvise and learn, as much as it highlights the application of bureaucratic plans prepared at the top management level.

Conclusions and Perspectives

There is, as declared, a tension between the need for planning and structuring versus the need for improvisation and adaption in crisis management, according to several crisis management researchers. This chapter stresses the fact that the conditions for crisis communications in the digital age further reveal such tensions. Within the practitioner who is engaged in crisis communication through social media there occurs a mental struggle between the “classical” logic and the “new” logic for understanding and practicing crisis management and crisis communication. On the one hand, the digital crisis communicator improvises and interacts with his or her surroundings to a greater extent than ever before. On the other hand, crisis communicators are still influenced by ideals that advocate centralized decision-making, control of information flows, and detailed crisis management plans. The final conclusion is, however, that, more than ever before, crisis communication practitioners working in the digital landscape improvise and rid themselves of the requirement to implement dictated crisis management rules and plans. The question is, however, how both researchers and practitioners should understand the concept of strategy in this context. Could it be that strategy has now played out its role as a tool in this situation-oriented context of crisis management and new media? Or is the meaning of the concept changing? According to this study, an alternative explanation and understanding of the strategy concept is needed in the context of effective digital crisis management. There is also a need for new understanding of how successful strategies emerge in this context. If we assume that Scandinavian Airlines’ award-winning crisis communication through social media was
effective and successful, we can from this case study draw some interesting conclusions about how such effective strategies apparently develop. Effective crisis communication seems not to be about senior crisis and/or emergency managers sitting in the office dictating successful courses. Instead, it is more about experienced and involved crisis communicators who improvise in close relation with the material at hand. Effective strategies seem to develop by the practitioners being in close contact with the situation. The practice of effective strategic crisis communication in the digital age can, therefore, be compared to the *craftsman logic*. According to Mintzberg (1987) the craftsman has an “intimate knowledge of her work, her capabilities, and her markers” (p. 66). The craftsman also “senses rather than analyzes” because her “knowledge is tacit” (p. 66). Craft strategy is, therefore, more about devotion, involvement with material and learning. Such a crafting perspective on strategy seems also, finally, to be in alignment with Gilpin and Murphy’s (2010) complexity approach on crisis management and crisis communication where ambiguity “encourages adaptive learning and sensemaking” (p. 684) is demanded. Effective strategy in today’s new digital environment for crisis management and crisis communication is, therefore, according this study, more about *crafting strategy*, in Mintzberg’s terms, than implementing strategy.

In conclusion, some reflections about the limits of the case study’s research design. First, it is just a single case study and there is, therefore, no basis for scientific generalization. The purpose was, instead, to generalize theoretical and conceptual propositions (see the Discussion section of this chapter). Second, the company did not initially consider the ash cloud incident as a crisis; it was seen more as a major traffic disruption. If it had been a serious accident, such as an airplane crash, probably a different scenario of crisis or emergency management would have occurred, working more in line with the “classical” logic of crisis management, according to the interviewees. Third, this case study took place at a moment when social media was not yet implemented in the company’s emergency plans and guidelines. These circumstances explain, in some part, the high level of improvisation and the effective grassroots strategies identified in the crisis work. Therefore, for a more nuanced knowledge, future studies are required of (a) the use of social media as a strategic tool in other kinds of crises—for example, crises without an insidious chain of events and/or crises where the organization has to repair images; and (b) the use of social media at the stage when it is already implemented in pre-established crisis management plans and guidelines.

The insights from this chapter add tentative knowledge about strategy work and crisis planning in the digital age to the body of knowledge in strategic communication. According to this chapter, an alternative explanation of the strategy concept is needed in digital crisis management. In such situations, effective strategy work seems to be more about crafting strategy than implementing strategy. This chapter, like most of the existing research on digital crisis communication, concerns macro-level questions about policy and planning rather than questions about argumentation and conversation between stakeholders. Therefore, further research is needed on the latter item, and especially studies concerning the “crafting” of the content in organizations. How are, for example, strategic crisis communication messages developed in interaction with comments and questions from audiences on the Web? Research methods from linguistics and speech communication (e.g., conversation analysis) may be used to deal with matters such as these, which are, from the viewpoint of strategic communication, highly important.

References


Crisis Communication in a Digital Age


