Alitalia's crisis in the media – a situational analysis

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this investigation is to explore Alitalia and the Italian Government's crisis response strategies (CRSs) implemented in three specific periods of 2008 to understand Alitalia and the Italian Government's approach in communicating with media stakeholders as well as to examine how main Italian and international newspapers framed Alitalia's CRSs.

Design/methodology/approach – This study adopts a content analysis approach to evaluate CRSs used by Alitalia and the Italian Government in their official press releases then reported by the main Italian and international newspapers.

Findings – Both Alitalia and the Italian Government focused mostly on corrective action – however, some differences in their choice of CRSs are visible during the three periods. Alitalia provided more information on the situation through its press releases than the government, whereas the government used in a larger measure excuse strategies, especially in the later period. In terms of news coverage, the content analysis shows that the CRSs reported by the international press correspond to those in the press releases whereas the Italian newspapers preferred other frames than those offered by Alitalia and the Italian Government.

Research limitations/implications – The findings confirm previous investigations on the importance of applying a context-oriented approach in crisis communication management, but they also underline the importance of media relations management.

Originality/value – This study extends the body of knowledge in crisis communication management and news coverage and offers some suggestions to manage effective media relations within the Italian media system.

Keywords Corporate communications, Communication management, Public relations, Government policy, Italy

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Recently, crisis management and communication appear to be even more relevant as we are experiencing a global economic crisis all over the world. There is no doubt that the efficacy of crisis management depends on pre-crisis prevention and preparation strategies to post-crisis containment and evaluation strategies (Kim, 2002; Massey and Larsen, 2006). Yet, it seems that many companies still have learned little from these recommendations as their interest in crisis communication appears only when the crisis is happening, when, in fact, they perceive the risk of negative publicity and thus consequences for their image among different stakeholders (Dean, 2004).

According to Gray and Balmer (1998, p. 697), "a company's image is the immediate mental picture that audiences have of an organization in a specific period of time". Company image is frequently dependent on media coverage and framing of the issue.

The average person's real contact with events in society are limited, and so it is the media that constructs the public's knowledge of organizations, politicians, companies and situations (McQuail, 2000). There have been some studies (Huang, 2006; Martin and Boynton, 2005) that correlated organizations' choices of crisis response strategies (CRSs) with the tone of media coverage. The results suggested that the media's coverage of an organization during a crisis is directly related to particular communicative behaviours and practices of the organization.

Studies on media coverage of companies' crisis responses are extremely important, not only for assessing the effectiveness of companies' choices when responding to the crisis and preserving their image, but also for providing information on the impact of media coverage on possible investors' decisions (Golan and Wanta, 2001; McCombs *et al.*, 1997). Especially when companies suffer from financial crises and look for partnerships and external investors to save companies' assets from bankruptcy, the tone of media coverage and framing of companies' management, and financial situations have a huge impact on future shareholders' decisions (Pollock and Rindova, 2003).

For companies like Alitalia, the Italian national airline, which for several years has suffered from accusations of political interference, union disputes, financial woes and most recently high fuel costs, the impact of media coverage on national and foreign investors' image of the company is quite relevant. Especially in the last year, Alitalia's financial situation has worsened and the only possible solution envisaged by its management board was to sell Alitalia's shares to other international airlines. The process of privatization was, however, very difficult not only for the company but also for the different stakeholders involved. Could Alitalia have managed its situation better if its CRSs were different?

This study has two goals. First, it intends to explore Alitalia and the Italian Government's CRSs implemented in 2008 by looking at three specific periods that characterised the last year of crisis to understand Alitalia and the Italian Government's approach in communicating with the media stakeholders as a way to preserve the company's image. We included the Italian Government's CRSs in our analysis as the Italian state was the major owner of the company until the end of 2008 and thus played an important role in the company's decision making. We also look at possible differences within the government's press releases. At the beginning of 2008, the centre-left government lost support among its party members. New elections were held in April resulting in a new government from the centre-right. The two governments had different opinions on the future of Alitalia. Hence, this may have led to some differences in their choices of CRSs.

Second, our investigation aims at studying how main national and international newspapers framed Alitalia's crisis. Framing is related to how a story is positioned in media coverage. Framing events and issues in positive or negative terms provides audiences with visible public expressions of approval or disapproval of firms and their actions (Elsbach, 1994; Lamertz and Baum, 1998).

Based on the above objectives, our research questions are the following:

RQ1. Is there any difference between the choices of CRSs of Alitalia and the Italian Government during the three periods? If yes, in what respect?

RQ2. Is there any difference between the choices of CRSs of the centre-left and the centre-right governments? If yes, in what respect?

RQ3. Is there any difference between the choices of crisis responses mentioned in Alitalia and the Italian Governments' press releases with those reported by national and international journalists? If yes, in what respect?

RQ4. Is there any difference between the international and the Italian news media in the tone of news coverage when reporting Alitalia and the Italian Government's CRSs during the three periods? If yes, in what respect?

Theoretical background

According to Frandsen and Johansen (2009b), crisis communication research has developed primarily into two fields of thoughts: the rhetorical or text-oriented tradition and the strategic or context-oriented tradition. The rhetorical tradition focuses on what and how an organization communicates, whereas the strategic tradition is more interested in when and where the organization must communicate. Most academic and professional literature deals with the rhetorical tradition and focuses on form and content recommendations for effective post-crisis communication management (Coombs, 1999). Accordingly, it is important for organizations to take into consideration the impressions as well as the responsibilities attributed to organizations by stakeholders. Sturges (1994) uses the term instructive information to describe detailed crisis-related information that stakeholders need. The instructive information model is crucial because it reinforces stakeholders' perception about the organization's level of control over the crisis. More precisely, Sturges (1994) identifies three types of information which the organization can address to its stakeholders, and above all to the victims of the crisis: instructing, adaptive and internalizing. Coombs (1999) further explains that messages with a compassionate nature are considered more effective because they show concern for the victims and so they facilitate the development of organizational reputation and credibility.

Within both the rhetorical and strategic traditions, apologies are considered an important CSR (Frandsen and Johansen, 2009a, 2010). Rhetorical studies examine strategies that individuals and organizations adopt to defend their image from public attacks. Studies on apologia applied to crisis communication are frequent. Theoretical contributions can be found, for instance, in the works of Benoit (1995), Hearit (2006) and Frandsen and Johansen (2007, 2009a). In summarising theoretical insights from apologia, account-giving and impression management theory, Benoit (1997) identified five image restoration strategies, each with variants: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, corrective action and mortification. Some years earlier, Bradford and Garrett (1995), with reference to attribution error and discounting principle theories developed a model similar to Benoit's model made up of four response strategies: denials, excuses, justification and concession. These type of approaches to crisis communication were later criticised because they exclusively devoted attention to describing and defining crisis communication strategies, but they neglected the configuration of the crisis situation (Coombs, 1998) and do not show causal inferences between crisis situation, response strategies and generated effects, except for a few studies (Dardis and Haigh, 2009). On the contrary, the context-focused models devoted extensive attention to characteristics of crisis situations in order to match them with crisis communication strategies (Coombs, 2001). The analysis of crisis scenarios determines the choice of appropriate response strategies. Coombs (1998) argues that crisis responsibility should be considered a grounding factor for analysing crisis

situations, and can be affected by the crisis responsibility and performance history of an organization.

Scholars interested in understanding the effects of organizations' choice in crisis responses and their impact in image restorations also looked at the role of media framing and agenda setting (Huang, 2006; Wanta *et al.*, 2004; Pollock and Rindova, 2003; Yioutas and Segvic, 2003). Mass media play a key role in providing relevant information about events that occur around the world every day. In their function as gatekeepers, they determine the relevance and importance of events according to specific media. Not only the choice of media format, i.e. print, radio, TV, online – but also the specificity that each country has on media systems and journalistic practices have an impact on the news contents. What we read, see and hear through our national media is, therefore, based on national characteristics and specific media formats we are using.

Studies in agenda setting show that the public learns the relative importance of issues from the amount of coverage given to the issues in the news media (Wanta *et al.*, 2004). Additionally, the media play a key role in presenting information that affects impression formation and the legitimation of firms to the public (Pollock and Rindova, 2003; Carroll and McCombs, 2003). Media, in fact, not only inform investors and key stakeholders on the main issues related to the organization, but also highlight and frame specific features that, especially in situations of crisis, may not help the company in regaining stability. Crises, therefore, represent potential threats to the image of an organization because they can generate tangible and intangible damages, such as financial losses or negative effects on reputation (Benoit, 1997; Meijer, 2004; Meijer and Kleinnnijenhuis, 2006).

Moreover, organizations that do not promptly react to the crisis with adequate measures will encounter an additional problem of the media accusing them of ignoring the crisis and acting irresponsibly to the crisis. In crisis situations, observers tend to focus on the negative action, whereas the context in which the crisis occurred often fades into the background (Bradford and Garrett, 1995). If the organization does not provide a "response that furnishes situational information (i.e. extenuating circumstances surrounding the crisis) and/or positive dispositional information (i.e. values, intentions, standards, remorse), investors and key stakeholders may misattribute the responsibility for the crisis to the organization's negative dispositions" (Huang, 2006, p. 181).

The impact of media framing and agenda on organizations' image and reputation among key stakeholders is also relevant in relation to investor decisions. Pollack and Rindova (2003) studied newly established public firms and discovered that in 225 initial public offerings, the volume of media provided information had a negative, diminishing relationship with underpricing and a positive, diminishing relationship with stock turnover on the first day of trading. Similarly, other studies on the influence of information intermediaries such as financial analysts and the media on stock markets confirmed that media-provided information affects investors' impressions of companies (Deephouse, 2000; Rao *et al.*, 2001; Rindova and Fombrun, 1999; Zuckerman, 1999).

In the case of Alitalia, media exposure of the company's financial situations can have two major consequences. The first is related to the company's image *vis-à-vis* to its performance during the crisis. If media coverage is negative and disconfirm company's CRSs, Alitalia will face grave image problems. The second concerns the impact of the company's image as reported in the media on foreign investors' decisions. If the media coverage is negative, company's intentions of responding to the crisis can result in being less effective, the trust of the market in Alitalia's possibilities to overcome the crisis will

be reduced with negative consequences for the company's share price and on investors' decisions of buying Alitalia's assets.

Alitalia's crisis is a typical example of crisis caused by misplaced management values. In our view, the crisis of the Italian airline is, in fact, the result of the management's failure to renew the company strategies and remaining competitive within the air transportation sector. The only envisaged solution to make Alitalia competitive and heal its financial situation was to sell its shares to private investors. Before presenting the methodologies and findings, it is important to briefly review the company's historical situation to explain how Alitalia went from a leading airline to a money-losing public company.

Alitalia's history

Alitalia, the Italian national airline, was created in 1946 by IRI[1] with British financial assistance. Alitalia started to operate with its first flight on 5 May 1947 and later on in the fifties it extends its influence acquiring other carriers, such as Linee Aeree Transcontinentali Italiane and Linee Aeree Italiane. After about 20 years of operations, Alitalia was ranked seventh in terms of international air transportation and in Europe, it was the third airline after British Airways and Air France for number of passengers. It connected 70 nations, had a revenue of €70 billion and counted 10,000 employees around the world. In the 1970s, Alitalia experienced a difficult financial crisis. The price of crude oil quadrupled, the western economies entered a period of recession, and airlines experienced a sharp decrease in demand. Inflation and political instability in Italy during the latter half of the decade left the airline facing large debts, persistent losses and falling revenues. By the 1980s, despite the partial re-equipment program of the past few years, the airline's fleet had become outdated and inefficient; the average age of their aircrafts ranged from six to eight years, generally older than those of the company's European competitors (Grant, 1999, p. 15). The 1990s did not look much better for the Italian carrier. The company replaced several managing directors and each of them proposed a different strategy. These changes did not make the company more competitive, but rather increased its debts. A first manoeuvre to rescue Alitalia's financial situation was to sell 21 percent of the company's shares to its employees and another 15 percent to external private buyers.

In 1997, Alitalia entered into an alliance with KLM, but this deal collapsed in early 2000, when KLM withdrew from the partnership after delays in privatizing the Italian company and problems with the new airport at Malpensa, outside Milan, which KLM and Alitalia had planned to use as a hub (Economist Intelligent Unit (EIU), 2006, p. 26). Political interferences did not help the process of privatization despite a further staff reduction, other cuts in the expenditures and the Italian Government's loan of €400 million as a sort of "rescue plan" to support part of the costs of Alitalia and avoid its imminent collapse, Alitalia's financial situation did not improve, but rather progressively degenerated. In 2006, the government could no longer offer support to the failing airline since it had been forbidden by the European Union to inject new capital. The government had then to lead Alitalia towards privatization by reducing its part of ownership in it. An offer came from Air France-KLM in 2006. The company proposed to pay only the market value of convertible bonds that Alitalia issued, rather than their nominal value, and to buy Alitalia's shares for a lower price than the market value (about €0.10 per share). Additionally, Air France-KLM intended to scale back routes and to give only Fiumicino

a significant role as an intercontinental airport as well as to cut another 2,100 jobs in order to return the company to profitability by 2009 ((*The*) *Economist*, 2008). The takeover bid did not go through, amongst other things because of the political instability at the beginning of 2008, which led to the fall of Prodi's government. The new government led by Berlusconi was from the beginning clearly against the Air France-KLM offer (EIU, 2008, p. 13) and continued to block the approval of the agreement. In May 2008, the Italian Government lent the airline €300 million to save Alitalia from collapsing. This latest bid was strongly criticised at the European Union level and afterward, the European Union set a moratorium on any support before 2011. Alitalia did not survive this moratorium and went into liquidation in Summer 2008.

In September, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi issued a decree revising Italy's bankruptcy – protection law to protect the group of Italian investors who were willing to acquire Alitalia's assets from Alitalia's creditors. The new law allowed those investors to swiftly buy Alitalia's potentially profitable parts, while the airline's aging fleet and most of its €1.2 billion in debt were liquidated. After different negotiations between Italian labour unions, foreign partners and the group of Italian investors, Compagnia Aerea Italiana (CAI) SpA[2], a new agreement was found in the Autumn. The viable parts of Alitalia were bought on 12 December 2008 by CAI, which also bought AirOne, another small Italian airline, and merged it with the old Alitalia. About 25 percent of Alitalia was also bought by Air France-KLM for €323 million under a co-operation agreement with CAI signed in January 2009 (Dinmore *et al.*, 2009).

Research design
In this study, we investigated Alitalia's crisis during the last year before its privatization. Specifically, we operationalized the last year of the crisis into three major critical events and for each of them, we analysed Alitalia and the Italian Government's CRSs as well as national and international media framing. Period A comprises the first four months of 2008 until the fall of the centre-left government and the election at the end of April of the new centre-right government led by Berlusconi. During this period, the Italian Government tried to reach an agreement with Air France-KLM, while the opposition parties were against Air France-KLM's offer. Several statements by Berlusconi and its allied parties about the existence of a better alternative for Alitalia's future, a more "Italian" alternative, characterised most of the media coverage of that time.

Period B begins with the election of the centre-right government and ends on mid-August. During the first four months of government, Berlusconi announced his personal commitment in putting together a consortium of Italian investors willing to buy Alitalia's shares. However, no certitude of the existence of such group and no name of possible investors were publicly given.

Period C comprises the last four months of the year when the government officially announced the formation of CAI and started the process of privatization. Some of the decisions taken during this period were highly criticised by labour unions and other parties and several strikes occurred.

Sample and methodology
A total of 77 press releases, 51 of which were published on Alitalia web site and 26 were published on the Italian Government web site, distributed from 1 January until 31 December 2008, were selected and content-analysed.

In order to determine the CRSs, we combined the most important categories of CRSs from Benoit's (1997), Sturges' (1994), Coombs' (1998), Bradford and Garret's (1995) and Huang's (2006) models. We chose to integrate these models so to be able to explain more precisely the responses strategies of Alitalia *vis-à-vis* its typology of crisis and the peculiarities of its organizational structure. We propose eight main communicative responses in our model of analysis, as summarised in Table I, each with its own variants.

For the media coverage of company's crisis situation, we content-analysed both the tone of news articles and Alitalia's crisis responses as reported by the journalists. For the latter, we used the same model of analysis as for the press releases. The data consist of 601 relevant media articles published between January and December 2008 by three main Italian newspapers (*Il Corriere della Sera, La Repubblica* and *Il Sole 24Ore*) and two international newspapers (*The Financial Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*). For the English newspapers, the articles were retrieved through LexisNexis database, whereas for the Italian newspapers, we looked at the newspapers' online archives. We searched for news articles that included both "Alitalia" and "crisis" terms and selected only those that dedicated at least one third of the text (counted on number of lines) in discussing Alitalia's case. Since the resulting sample was too extensive for a content analysis, we decided to select every third article. The final sample resulted in 601 news articles. Detailed information is summarised in Table II.

The paper describes the frequency of each communication strategy's appearance in the press releases as well as in the national and international newspapers. Each press release and news article was operationalized in units of analysis according to the topics discussed and the strategic action implied. A topic refers to a journalist's reporting of an event, decision, action or discussion about the crisis, Alitalia, Italian Government, investor relations, labour unions relations, employee relations, etc. A topic can be discussed in one statement or more. When one or more statements dealt with the same topic, they were counted as one unit of analysis. For strategic action is meant Alitalia's response to a specific event of the crisis.

Each press release and news article could contain several units of analysis. Therefore, each press release and news article could refer to multiple topics and CRSs. We analysed each unit through our integrated model of CRSs by looking at the network of interrelationships among concepts (Neuendorf, 2002). By using this approach, we were able to be more precise in correlating each unit with a specific strategy without missing the contextual meaning of the message. Additionally, for the news articles we identified the tone of each unit of analysis, that is, we examined whether journalists used positive, neutral or negative terms when referring to specific topics of Alitalia's crisis. We decided not to create a pre-determined list of topics, but rather categorise them a posteriori. Hence, we identified the three most salient topics of each article on account of the amount of "space" (lines) dedicated to each topic. Then we looked at the attributes associated to those topics, that is, we considered adjectives and words used by the journalists to describe, analyse and explain Alitalia's situation and classified them according to their tone. Subsequently, we studied those topics to see whether a strategic action was presented or not. The presence of a strategic action implies that journalists reported a crisis response. This was necessary in order to see whether journalists reported or not, while discussing specific topics, the same CRSs as those evidenced through press releases of Alitalia and the Italian Government. We finally correlate topic, tone and CSR in order to see how news media framed Alitalia and the Italian Government's CRSs.

No	CRSs	Description
1	Attack the accuser	Confront adversial person or group, by questioning their credibility
2	Denials	Deny the existence of crisis or organization's responsibility over crisis
	Simple denial	Deny or neglect the occurrence of the questionable event
	Rejection	Deny that the organization is guilty
	Build a new agenda	Neglect the occurrence of the crisis by switching the media focus (or public attention) to a new issue
3	Excuses	Describe the factors that provoked the crisis and that limited the organization's control over it
	Provocation	Response to someone else's actions
	Defeasibility	Lack of information about events leading to the crisis situation
	Accidental	Lack of control over events leading to the crisis situation
	Shift blame (scapegoat)	Another person or group is guilty
	Deny intentions	The organization's actions had good purposes
	Victimization	The organization received attacks from an external person or group
4	Justifications	Acknowledge responsibility over the crisis, even if the organization tries to minimize the seriousness of the crisis situation
	Minimization	Downsize the seriousness of the crisis
	Differentiation	Downsize the seriousness of the organization's actions
	Transcendence (reframing)	Reframe the facets within the same issue, but in a larger or favourable context
5	Ingratiation	Seek public approval
	Praise	Commend stakeholders for their actions
	Bolstering (reminder)	Remind stakeholders of the past good deeds the organization did for them
6	Providing information	Address information about the crisis to stakeholders and victims
	Instructive	Tell the victims of the crisis how to react
	Adaptive	Help the victims of the crisis to cope with it
	Internalizing	Support the victims of the crisis to formulate an image about the organization
	Clarification	Correct inaccurate information in circulation about the crisis
7	Corrective action	Describe the actual actions and the verbal promise of future actions
	Compensation	Offer money or other gifts to victims
	Repair	Return to the pre-crisis situation
	Rectification	Take actions to prevent a repeat of the crisis in the future
	Change of corporate policy	Decide to change the current policies for more appropriate ones
8	Apology	Show full compassion and concern towards the victims of the crisis
	Sympathy	Express regards/sympathy towards the victims (without apology)
	Full apology	Take full responsibility for the crisis and ask forgiveness for it

Table I.
Valentini and Romenti's
integrated model of CRSs

With the purpose of checking the inter-coder reliability and consistency, a random sample of eight press releases (circa 10 percent of the total amount of press releases) and 60 news articles (circa 10 percent of the total amount of news articles) were coded by both coders (Bauer, 2000; Stempel and Wesley, 1981). Cohen's kappa was 0.77 for the press releases and 0.81 for the news articles.

Findings

RQ1. Is there any difference between the choices of CRSs of Alitalia and the Italian Government during the three periods? If yes, in what respect?

As Table III shows, some differences in the choice of CRSs are visible in Periods B and C, since during Period A, no press release from the government was published. During Period B, both Alitalia and the Italian Government focused mostly on corrective action (50 percent); however, the second and third most employed strategies by Alitalia were providing information (33 percent) and ingratiation (17 percent) whereas for the government were ingratiation (38 percent) and excuse (13 percent) strategies. In Period C, Alitalia continued to use corrective actions (33 percent) and providing information (39 percent) strategies, but increased the use of excuse (17 percent) strategies. Two out of three press releases of the Italian Government reported corrective actions (63 percent) and to lesser extent ingratiation (29 percent) and excuse (8 percent) strategies. This means that during Period B, Alitalia provided more information on the situation through its press releases than the government, whereas the government, which was seeking for new investors after the failure of the Air France-KLM's bid, used in a larger measure excuse strategies to explain the situation. Differently, in Period C the government, after announcing the formation of the CAI group, mentioned corrective action and ingratiation strategies in its press releases more frequently than Alitalia:

RQ2. Is there any difference between the choices of CRSs of the centre-left and the centre-right governments? If yes, in what respect?

No government press release dealing with Alitalia was found in the first months of 2008 during centre-left government. All press releases analysed were thus produced by centre-right government after its election in April:

RQ3. Is there any difference between the choices of crisis responses mentioned in Alitalia and Italian Governments' press releases with those reported by national and international journalists? If yes, in what respect?

As Table III shows, the CRSs reported by the international press correspond to those in the press releases. From the analysis of the 154 international articles, in all three periods, the most frequently employed response strategy was corrective action with the aim of rectification (61 percent), communicating the change of corporate policy (19 percent) and reparation (9 percent). The second most used strategy was providing information, especially the internalized type. The first and the second most frequent

Category	Newspapers Name	No. of articles/ newspaper	No. of articles/ category	Total articles
Italian	*Il Corriere della Sera*	216		
	La Repubblica	188	447	
	Il Sole 24 Ore	43		601
International	*The Financial Times*	102	154	
	The Wall Street Journal	52		

Table II.
Summary of the news articles analysed

CRSs	Press releases		Italian newspapers				International newspapers			
	Alitalia (%)	Government (%)	CRSs/frames[a] (%)	Tone of Italian news coverage[b]			CRSs/frames[a] (%)	Tone of international news coverage[b]		
				Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)		Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
Period A										
Attack	0	0	12[c]	0	0	100	0	0	0	0
Denial	5	0	4	0	0	100	4	0	25	75
Excuse	5	0	21	0	34	66	12	12	32	56
Justification	2	0	21	0	31	69	2	0	80	20
Ingratiation	10	0	11	21	16	63	9	5	63	32
Information providing	29	0	7	42	8	50	35	14	54	32
Corrective action	50	0	4	33	33	33	37	14	68	17
Apology	0	0	21[c]	17	54	29	0	0	0	0
Period B										
Attack	0	0	9[c]	0	33	67	0	0	0	0
Denial	0	0	11	0	14	86	1	0	100	0
Excuse	0	13	17	0	18	82	6	0	0	100
Justification	0	0	17	0	45	55	0	0	0	0
Ingratiation	17	38	13	0	50	50	6	40	20	40
Information providing	33	0	14	22	78	0	28	5	55	41
Corrective action	50	50	0	0	0	0	57	20	53	27
Apology	0	0	19[c]	33	0	67	1[c]	0	0	100
Period C										
Attack	0	0	7[c]	5	25	70	1[c]	0	0	0
Denial	0	0	3	0	67	33	2	0	100	0
Excuse	17	8	16	6	19	74	5	0	30	70
Justification	4	0	21	11	5	84	1	0	100	0
Ingratiation	7	29	2	0	71	29	10	16	47	37
Information providing	39	0	15	7	20	73	35	13	44	43
Corrective action	33	63	13	3	24	74	46	6	42	52
Apology	0	0	23[c]	0	19	81	0	0	0	0

Notes: [a]These percentages represent the preference of journalists in reporting the different CRSs and/or the preference of journalists for specific frames; the percentage is calculated on the total number of topics per each newspaper; [c]these percentages refer to accusing or apologetic frames as both Alitalia and the Italian Government did not use "attack the accuser" or "apology" strategies in any of the three periods; [b]the tone of international news coverage[b]

responses are certainly correlated with the aim, perceived by international press, of clearly informing public opinion about the important and necessary solutions that Alitalia needed to put in place to avoid liquidation. Most of the articles analyse the economic scenario, opportunities and potential threats that Alitalia could face in the immediate future. In Periods A and B, the third most frequent response was excuses (12 and 6 percent), especially shift blame. Typical shifting blame arguments were used when Alitalia wanted to dissociate the company's responsibility from crew and airport staff's strikes, which paralyzed air traffic several times and caused numerous problems to the passengers. Additionally, in Period B, 6 percent of international press coverage referred to ingratiation strategy. In Period C, the third most used strategy is ingratiation (10 percent) which is the second most used strategy by the Italian Government (29 percent).

Differently, the Italian news media only marginally reported Alitalia and the Italian Government's CRSs, partially ignoring to give an account of corrective action strategies employed by Alitalia and the Italian Government. Few articles in the Italian news media reported this type of crisis responses and this was mostly during the third period of the year, when information on the establishment of CAI and on a new agreement was announced (Period C in Table III).

Italian journalists appeared to use other frames than those offered by Alitalia and the Italian Government during Periods A and B. Their focus shifted from economical and technical aspects of Alitalia's rescue to the consequences for employability and social welfare. Moreover, they primarily presented the three periods of the crisis through an "apologetic" frame. The apologetic frame was particularly visible in statements where journalists expressed compassion for both Alitalia's employees and Italian citizens after revealing the existence, not confirmed before Autumn, of a new group of investors in August or when Alitalia's announced further cuts and reductions on the number of crew (Period C).

As Italian citizens were considered the most important victims of the crisis because the Alitalia's financial losses continue to grind on the people who pay taxes (Bragantini, 2008), Italian newspapers attempted to raise public opinion against Alitalia management and the Italian Government in order to make them admit their responsibilities and find immediate solutions. The crisis situation became even more complicated because labour unions imposed strict conditions on Alitalia and the Italian Government during the negotiations and by doing so, they significantly influenced Alitalia's discussions with the potential investors (Dragoni, 2008):

RQ4. Is there any difference between the international and the Italian news media in the tone of news coverage when reporting Alitalia and the Italian Government's CRSs during the three periods? If yes, in what respect?

Although both Italian and the international news coverage becomes more negative in the last period, positive, neutral and negative tones of news coverage during Periods A, B and C remain substantially constant in all media outlets. Generally, international newspapers discussed Alitalia's crisis with a more neutral tone by providing information on the economic situation as well as on the possible solutions. Italian newspapers, on the contrary, depicted the crisis in a more negative manner (Table III). The choice of the Italian newspapers was to stress the emotional and spectacular aspects of the news, to exaggerate

the tones rather than to investigate and discuss what went wrong and how the crisis can be overcome.

During Period A, both Italian and international media coverage framed denial and excuse strategies with negative tones. While the Italian journalists used negative tones in describing all other response strategies, except for corrective actions, the international press discussed those strategies in a more neutral manner. In Period B, denial, excuse and justification strategies were negatively perceived by Italian journalists, whereas the international press negatively reported only excuse strategies. In Period C, both the Italian and the international media coverage negatively framed excuse and corrective action strategies; the Italian coverage was also more unfavourable in respect to justification and information providing strategies. Corrective actions were critically presented because those actions displeased many parties involved with Alitalia. Specifically, the Italian Government's solution for solving the crisis was highly criticised by labour unions and employee associations.

Discussion and conclusions

At a first glance, two main results gain considerable relevance. First, no major differences between the choices of Alitalia and the Italian Government's CRSs during the three periods are visible. Second, both Alitalia and the Italian Government marginally took into consideration the three critical events occurred in 2008 for choosing their response strategies. From the beginning until the end of the year, they mostly employed corrective action and information providing strategies. Most of the statements announce that the company will replace its corporate policies with more appropriate ones as if Alitalia considered the crisis to be an opportunity to change. The providing information category is also dominant and concerns messages to support people in shaping the image of a positive organization. These communication strategies are consistent with the implicit signals of change launched by Alitalia and the new government. The idea of change, in fact, was framed not only in association with a change in the management due to the privatization of Alitalia, but also with a political change. The new government wanted to transmit a sense of complete crisis control and to assure Italian public opinion of its good intentions of solving Alitalia's crisis as soon as possible.

In particular, the Alitalia's management and the Italian Government formally distance themselves from their responsibilities. Distance strategies together with rationale and messages written in a cold tone are, in fact, prevalent. Alitalia and the Italian Government appear completely detached from stakeholders' concerns and, in particular during the third part of the year (Period C), they apply an excuse approach and the use of accusatory language addressed to labour unions and workers on strike. Labour unions and workers are accused of protecting their privileges and neglecting the more general social and economic impact of their positions.

Alitalia seldom tried to respond to psychological concerns by using rectification messages for the general public, and no specific segmentation of message contents was visible in order to reach those categories of stakeholders mostly damaged by the crisis, for example, suddenly fired employees and passengers stricken by continuous strikes.

Both Alitalia and the Italian Government applied a strategy consistent with theoretical and empirical studies focused on matching scenario characteristics with

CRSs (Coombs, 2001). These studies suggest a pure corrective action approach without apology in the case of crises characterised by both a high level of responsibility attached to the organization and significant financial damages. This is the case of Alitalia which has a long history of past crises mostly due to misbehaviour and financial inefficiency on the part of the state-owned management. However, from our analysis it appears that a strong focus on informative and rational contents conveying the image of a company that wants to gain control of the situation at any cost was not the best solution. The way Italian media depicted Alitalia shows a different image: an image of a company that seems to forget that problems arising from crises have different natures, not only financial and technical, but also mental and psychological ones.

In this respect, Italian and international media played a crucial role in influencing the Alitalia's image among its stakeholders. Most of the newspapers' coverage of Alitalia's crisis framed Alitalia and the Italian Government's responses rather negatively, questioning thus the capacity of the Alitalia management to solve the crisis. The role of media on investors' opinions on whether to invest in Alitalia or not was also visible during the negotiations. According to the Air France's managing director, Mr Spinetta, the offer by Air France-KLM failed primarily because of Italian labour unions' disputes and because of the continuously negative messages and the accusations of unfairness reported by Italian newspapers (Iezzi, 2008). Furthermore, in Periods B and C, the critical coverage provoked incertitude among the potential Italian investors, which asked in several occasions to be reassured by the government and in primis by the Prime Minister Berlusconi. The negotiation took several months before a satisfactory conclusion was reached, with significant impact upon company's assets.

When considering how Italian and international news media reported Alitalia and the Italian CRSs, our analysis confirms that international media focused primarily on providing information to readers about Alitalia's problems and possible solutions, whereas Italian media covered Alitalia's crisis differently. In all three periods, Italian media seldom reported corrective actions and information providing strategies and when they did, they frequently associated them with a more negative tone. Although Alitalia and the Italian Government did not use so much ingratiation strategies, when Italian media reported them, these had a more positive tone during Periods B and C. In other words, Italian journalists appreciate when Alitalia seeks for public approval and remind its stakeholders of the past good deeds that it did for them.

Additionally, Italian media used other frames, such as "apologetic" and "attack" frames, which were not used either by Alitalia or by the Italian Government. Especially the "apologetic" frame was used when Italian journalists demanded the Italian Government and Alitalia for an apology expressing concern for the victims of the crisis.

The tone of the Italian print media continued to be negative and accusative against the government, the company, labour unions and any other actors involved in the crisis even after the new government's proposition for an Italian bid. Even after that, Italian newspapers continued to encourage Alitalia to make an apology. They also focused more on social and political issues rather than on economic consequences caused by the privatization of the company.

The diversity of Italian and international media coverage of Alitalia's crisis is to be ascribed to differences between the Anglo-Saxon and Italian media systems and journalistic practices. According to Hallin and Mancini (2004, pp. 67-8), the Italian

media system is part of the "Mediterranean or polarized pluralist model", which is characterised by high levels of politicization of the media. Because of this system, Italian journalism genre is rather embedded to a "political sensationalism", a dramatization and intensification of political conflicts (Mancini, 2000, p. 323). The dominant approach in Italian journalistic practices to report crises was narrative. The aim was to make dramas and stories out of crisis by focusing on sensationalism, emotional tones and expressions of concern with people involved. Technical aspects and economic consequences of crisis and of proposed solutions were frequently neglected and remained in the background of the general media agenda.

Taking into consideration the frames and tones of media coverage of Alitalia and the Italian Government's CRSs, this analysis shows that crisis' attributes, such as the level of responsibility attached to organization and the degree of financial damage, have a partial role in determining the most effective response strategies. Since the media plays an important role in framing organizations' responses to a crisis and consequently they have an impact on public opinion's perception of the crisis and of the capacity of organizations to resolve the crisis, the characteristics of media system can be crucial variables in influencing the effectiveness of crisis communications.

Hence, our findings confirm previous investigations on the importance of applying a context-oriented approach in crisis communication management (Coombs, 2001), but they also underline the importance of media relations management. In order to effectively manage media stakeholders, companies should consider the specific features of the national media system and journalistic practices before choosing CRSs. In this specific case, the Italian Government and Alitalia should have applied a different media strategy. A strategy that takes better into account stakeholders' needs through messages showing an emotional tone and expressions of concern would have resulted to be more effective. A light apology response strategy, in particular by expressing sympathy, would have been more effective in the specific contexts. The apologetic response should have also been combined with more information and compassion communication strategies. These, as suggested by crisis communication literature (Frandsen and Johansen, 2009a, b; Hearit, 2006; Coombs, 2001), have a more positive impact on the company's image and reputation among media, and among the different categories of stakeholders which have been addressed through them.

Limitations

This study is restricted by two main limitations. First, the qualitative analysis focuses on press releases and media coverage, but neglects any other sort of written and oral company material which could have contributed to frame the story of the crisis. The reason for excluding other material from our analysis was mostly due to the difficulty of getting in touch with Alitalia's management, which was resistant to issue any kind of statements about the crisis. Second, the paper does not precisely examine the reactions of stakeholders, specifically investors, to response strategies adopted by the company and the government. In order to capture the opinions and perceptions of investors, surveys on samples of different stakeholders should have been conducted. Taking into consideration these limitations, the contribution of our study for the field of crisis communication consists of offering some suggestions for effective management of media relations within the Italian media context.

Notes

1. IRI, abbreviation for *Istituto per la ricostruzione industriale* (Institute for Industrial Reconstruction), was created in 1933 to save the banking and industrial sectors from the paralysis due to the crisis of those years. It was a state-owned body that was dismissed in 2000.

2. CAI is a consortium which has been created by major Italian entrepreneurs and financial institutions, called to action by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi during the 2008 election race and the first months of his duty. CAI is liable for all Alitalia expenses since 1 December 2008.

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