



# Enhancing Consistency in Dynamic Stakeholder Interactions

On Implementing Blogs in Crisis Communication

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Author: Lisa Damgaard

Study Concentration: Marketing Communications Management

Counsellor: Mikkel Flyverbom

Institute: Dept. of Intercultural Communication and Management

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## Foreword

This master's thesis represents the final product of my years as a master's student at Copenhagen Business School. Its primary objective is to explore the use of blogs in crisis communication in order to make suggestions regarding how organisations can enhance consistency in such dynamic interactions. The thesis is aimed at both crisis communication practitioners and scholars.

The preparation of this thesis has been helped by many people, and I would like to express my appreciation to those who have assisted me in the long process of making this thesis a reality. First of all, I would like to thank my thesis counsellor, Mikkel Flyverbom, for his excellent supervision throughout the process. Not only did Mikkel to the fullest live up to the prescribed duties of a thesis counsellor, he also became to me an amazing sparring partner and listener and more than once, he showed me the way out of deadlocked situations. I have no doubt in my mind that his assistance has positively and substantially affected the quality of my research. I would also like to acknowledge the corporation received from Sanne Vinther, Arla Foods, who made herself available for an interview which shed light on an otherwise inaccessible internal dimension of my subject and thereby contributed greatly to the results of my work. Line Bessmann deserves thanks for her assistance regarding the layout of my thesis. I would also like to express my gratitude to Jacob Pedersen and Christine Clausen for help with the text and for editorial assistance and not least for patiently listening and for shared enthusiasm when new breakthroughs occurred. Finally, I have much indebted to family, friends, co-students, and colleagues for keeping up my spirit and providing constant support to me and my research throughout the process.

Lisa Damgaard

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## Executive Summary

Using the dairy company Arla Foods and the Cartoon Crisis as a case study, this thesis explores the corporate blog as a new phenomenon in crisis communication with an applied view to how organisations can communicate their crisis responses consistently when blogs are added to the communication landscape. It thus differs from previous studies through its particular focus on *consistency* and how this concept unfolds in practice.

The problem statement was assessed using a combination of qualitative methods, namely an analysis of actual crisis communication efforts based on constructivist grounded theory and an informant interview. Through the analysis of Arla's crisis responses on three different communication platforms, the degree of consistency within and across these was evaluated. Surprisingly, the results showed a remarkable coherence between what was communicated through each channel during the crisis and also pointed to characteristics of the blog medium being remarkably different from those of other media. It was therefore concluded that blogs has a *raison d'être* in crisis communication, and that it is possible to communicate univocally within and across communication channels in crises when using blogs. In search of an explanation for this, analysis results of an interview conducted with a member of Arla's crisis communication team, namely the Stakeholder Relations Manager and blog coach in Arla Foods was included. These suggested that consistency in Arla's crisis communication was aided through its organisation of communication. However, the analysis in addition implied that organisations using blogs must be able to balance the need for control of communication (centralisation) with a demand of flexibility (e.g. loosely defined constraints of blogs), thereby making freeway for individual expressions on the blog. It was also concluded that consistency is interpedently linked with *transparency*. This entailed the suggestion that particular attention needs to be paid by organisations to the accessibility of its information. Finally, a number of alterations of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory were suggested. In particular, it was argued that a new crisis response strategy, *dissociation*, was added to the framework. Furthermore, a reinforcing strategy, *referencing external authorities*, was introduced as a support strategy being particularly useful for the blog medium.

The author suggested a number of implications for companies as well as the academic world. These included a proposition of mechanisms which can aid companies using blogs to obtain consistency in crisis communication. Also, the proposed problematisation of consistency points to future research, e.g. its merits could be examination through an assessment of stakeholders' perception of consistency and their ways of assessing corporate information. Also, an empirical testing of the proposed alterations of the SCCT was recommended.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Introduction and Problem Statement

Today's consumers form preferences for brands based not only on their tangible characteristics. Increasingly, the organisation behind is included as an important element in such considerations and therefore, protecting the corporate reputation - especially in times of crisis - is of pivotal importance. In doing so, some organisations have begun using blogs in their crisis communication. This medium is useful for dynamic interactions between organisations and stakeholders. However, blogs are also generally described as being unmanageable and difficult to control. Based on this, it can be suggested that the use of blogs can potentially distort the consistency of organisations' crisis communication. Thereby, tensions seem to exist between the consistency ideal, which demands centrally controlled corporate communication, and a contemporary ideal of stakeholder involvement, which demands organisational flexibility. Additionally, the concept *consistency* seems to be lacking empirical examination.

Contemporary literature on crisis communication acknowledges that crises and crisis communication are influenced by the Internet and related communication technologies. However, the implications of implementing blogs in crisis communication for organisations' ability to "speak with one voice" have not to a great extent been researched. Based on this, the focus of this thesis is to establish the features of consistency in crisis communication through an examination of actual communication efforts in order to make recommendations regarding how organisations can communicate consistently in crisis when blogs are added to their communication platform. The problem will be assessed based on a case study of Arla Foods and the Cartoon Crisis of 2006. Generally speaking, Danish companies still seem rather reluctant to embrace the blog medium in their crisis communication, but Arla has successfully used blogs in several crises. Therefore, this case study can arguably help shed light over how the tension between consistency and dynamic stakeholder interactions can be theoretically and practically managed. This leads to the following *research question* guiding the project:

*What role did blogs play in Arla's communication during the Cartoon Crisis and based on this, how can organisations manage consistency in crisis communication when blogs are added to the communication platform?*

As will be apparent from the subsequent literature review, consistency is a central concept in corporate communication and is often presented as the ultimate goal of the corporate communication function. While not being the goal of crisis communication, which is to ensure that an organisation is not negatively affected by a crisis, the concept also finds use in that field. There, it relates to the production and communication of uniform crisis responses. Due to the importance given to consistency in both fields of study and since this concept is the focal point of my research, I find it necessary to operationalise it. According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, consistency is “*the quality of always being the same*”. Thus, in the following, consistency is assumed equal to identical exposure of crisis responses by an organisation. It will therefore be evaluated based on Arla’s actual crisis communication on different platforms. Since consistent communication is assumedly an outcome of internal considerations, I will also analyse how communication is organised in Arla. As such, the stage is not set for a normative examination of whether the concept is good or bad but rather for illustrating how consistency is handled in practice.

## 1.2. Thesis Structure

Below follows an overview of the thesis’ structure:

- *Introduction*: The first chapter introduces the problem statement guiding the research, the structure of the thesis as well as the motivation behind the project.
- *Literature Review*: This second chapter presents the theoretical foundation of the thesis.
- *Methodology*: The methodology chapter introduces the reader to the research process and presents a more thorough discussion of employed methods.
- *Analysis*: The analysis includes an evaluation of the internal dimension of consistency management in Arla. It furthermore assesses and compares the occurrence of different external crisis response strategies in Arla’s communication during the crisis.
- *Conclusion and Implications*: The final chapter presents the main conclusions of the research and also suggests its implications for organisations as well as for future research.

### **1.3. Motivation**

A review of the existing literature on crisis communication reveals consensus on the importance of incorporating new media in an organisation's crisis communication plan. However, the implications of using blogs in crisis communication for organisations' ability to produce consistent crisis responses are largely neglected. Thus, there is an academic reasoning in my choice of subject for this research project. Academically, the lack of research in this particular sub-field of crisis communication justifies my research as it aspires to shed light on an underdeveloped area.

Furthermore, the project has been driven by personal motivations. I have previously studied crisis communication using Arla Foods as a case (Damgaard & Seehagen, 2008). There, the focus was on examining the relevance of known theories for crisis communication in highly complex crises. While increasing my interest in the field, the scope of the research project, however, did not allow for a thorough study of the entire situation, including an examination of the use of blogs. Thus, while producing very interesting results, the study left me with unanswered questions about crisis communication in the light of recent technological developments. Hence, there is a strong personal motivation behind this project too.

Finally, there is a practical dimension of my motivation. As stated in the introduction, Danish companies seem reluctant to use blogs in their handling of crises. This could be contributable to a lacking understanding of the blog as a crisis communication tool. Therefore, the results of my research will hopefully encourage more companies to utilise social media in their crisis communication.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Corporate Communication**

In the following, I present and discuss corporate communication and its basic premises. This part serves to introduce the reader to the consistency concept as it is presented in theories in this field of study. Additionally, a theory of how to manage communication through organisational structures is presented which provides the background for how I will analyse the internal dimension of consistency in Arla. Since my thesis centres on blogs, I will also briefly suggest how recent technological developments affect this research area.

### 2.1.1. Defining Corporate Communication

Previously, organisations' communication could be broadly categorised as marketing communication, organisational communication, or management communication, and each category had its own specific target audiences and flowed from specific organisational sources (van Riel, 1995: 2). Today, however, a new media environment, increased audience fragmentation, new communication technologies as well as new cross-functional organisational roles and departments have changed this orderly arranged picture. In practice this means that communication now flows from a range of different organisational sources, and it is argued that this might negatively affect the organisation: *"In practice, the large variety of internal communication 'sources' can lead to fragmented, sometimes even contradictory, external manifestations of the company as a whole"* (van Riel, 1995: 3). Therefore, a need for coordinating *all* forms of corporate communication has emerged. A definition encompassing this view and pointing to the goal of corporate communication is presented below:

*"Corporate communication is a management function that offers a framework for the effective coordination of all internal and external communication with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favourable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organization is dependent"* (Cornelissen, 2008; 5).

According to this definition, corporate communication demands an integrated approach to managing communication with the ultimate goal of establishing and maintaining favourable *reputations* with key stakeholders. Reputation is understood as the sum of evaluations of the organisation over time and its positive effects are widely recognised today. Among the advantages associated with a favourable organisational reputation are its positive effects on the organisation's ability to attract the people necessary for its success, its competitiveness, and its ability to demand premium prices for its products and services (Chaket, 1989; Brinkerhof, 1990; Blauw, 1994 - in van Riel, 1995: 76). In other words, *"a strong corporate reputation holds similar promises to the organisation as a powerful corporate brand: identification, differentiation and profitability"* (Christensen, Morsing & Cheney, 20008: 90).



### 2.1.2. Managing Consistency

The integration and coordination of all communication by an organisation is achievable through the way in which it organises its communication – that is, through the organisational structure. In the following, I will outline this approach to managing consistency which I find usable for a subsequent critical examining of Arla's internal approach to managing consistency.

#### *Organisational Structure*

How communication is organised is of crucial importance to organisations' ability to maintain consistency in their communication: "*Organizations that have not adequately organized their communication often send out conflicting messages and fail to make a consistent and strong impression on their stakeholders*" (Cornelissen, 2008: 120). This again emphasises that integrating all communication disciplines and activities are needed to create and maintain a favourable reputation. Furthermore, organising communication relates to enabling the corporate communication function to provide strategic input to senior management and streamline communication efforts in a cost-effective manner (Ibid.: 121).

When discussing organisation of communication, it is relevant to distinguish between two structural elements: vertical and horizontal structure. The former is typically apparent from organisational charts and refers to the hierarchy of authority within the organisation and how communication functions are grouped into departments and placed in it (Cornelissen, 2008: 125; van Riel, 1995: 143). Conversely, the horizontal structure, which is rather invisible to outsiders, refers to a variety of cross-functional coordinating mechanisms connecting communication specialists with another and with other organisational members. It thereby determines the organisation's ability to respond to emerging issues in a timely and effective manner and ensure consistent communication through all channels (Cornelissen, 2008: 136-137). Such mechanisms assisting organisations in integrating the work of their communication practitioners include: 1) recruitment, training and job rotation, 2) team work, 3) process documentation, 4) open communication and networking platforms which can serve as more informal channels of integration, 5) council meetings, 6) a strong corporate vision and formulated communication strategy, and finally 7) communication guidelines such as 'house style books' or brand manuals (Ibid.: 137-141).

### 2.1.3. Critique of Corporate Communication's View on Consistency

This section serves to problematise the consistency concept by illustrating how the basic premises of corporate communication can be challenged. The critique is useful for understanding the suggested tension between the integration ideal of corporate communication versus a contemporary ideal of dynamic stakeholder interactions. Additionally, it can provide suggestions of how it can be managed by organisations.

As previously stated, it is primarily recent changes regarding the media environment, audiences, communication technologies, and organisational roles that have spurred an increased interest in corporate communication and thus serve as its basic premises. It has been argued that these can be roughly grouped into three main propositions, each of which can be challenged as being logically defective (Christensen et al, 2008). In the following, I will therefore discuss these propositions as they represent the perhaps best articulated critique of corporate communication and its view on consistency.

The first proposition is *the communication effects thesis* which observes an increased noise in the communication context founded in more media channels, more communication, new preferences among receivers, audience fragmentation etc.. Based on this, the proposition advocates that the only way for organisations to break through the clutter is to turn to corporate communication in an effort to influence stakeholders (Christensen et al, 2008: 115). In other words, communication is presented as the cure, and the possibility of corporate communication itself contributing to this increased noise is not considered (Ibid.: 120). Additionally, it assumes that identical exposure is the only prerequisite for consistency. This assumption only takes into consideration the sender of a corporate message and thereby arguably neglects to appreciate that any message will be affected by target receivers' reception of it (Ibid.: 122). This arguably reflects a showdown between traditional transmission models of communication versus a view of communication as a two-way process of co-creation of meaning. While we as marketers want to believe that stakeholders are deeply involved in the organisation behind the brands they purchase, the proposition according to Christensen et al. overestimates this interest to an extent that can not be empirically verified (Ibid.: 123).

*The differentiation thesis*, the second proposition, advocates corporate communication by referring to it being increasingly difficult for organisations to differentiate their products from competitors'. While it is arguably true that today, products' differences are being eroded and the brand name is often worth much more than the physical product, the differentiation thesis fails to acknowledge that a similar problem exists regarding organisations' corporate communication efforts (Christensen et al, 2008: 124).

The third and last proposition, *the thesis of transparency*, observes an increased demand by critical stakeholders for transparency and critical examination of organisations (Christensen et al, 2008: 117-118). Transparency can be defined as “*a state in which the internal identity of the firm reflects positively the expectations of key stakeholders and the beliefs of these stakeholders about the firm reflect accurately the internally held identity*” (Fombrun & Rindova, 2000: 94), and it has been suggested that this state is best achieved through expressive communication with stakeholders (Ibid.). However, with reference to the limited human capacity to process information, increasing the amount of information might actually decrease rather than enhance transparency (Christensen et al, 2008: 128).

Apart from this criticism, there seems to be a conflict between the integration ideal of corporate communication – including the entailed need for organisational control – and current ideals of dialogue and stakeholder involvement, which implies that the organisation needs to be flexible. In other words, organisations today need to be *ambidextrous* – that is, able to balance the need for control with the need for flexibility (Christensen et al, 2008: 170). If the organisation is to be ambidextrous it requires a management allowing loose couplings (flexibility) within a centralised structure (Christensen et al, 2008; 182).

#### **2.1.4. Influence of Digital Media on Corporate Communication**

Another challenge for corporate communication is related to the technological developments of the past two decades. It can be argued that communication practitioners still rely on simple linear transmission models of communication which privileges the sender over the receiver. However, these are not necessarily adequate in a time where the internet is changing the power relationship between organisations and their constituents (Fawkes & Gregory, 2000; Argenti, 2006).

### *Challenges*

The internet and related technologies affect corporate communication in several ways. First, the internet has given organisations and stakeholders a channel for direct communication and interaction, and it has allowed for unlimited sources to provide their own information about the organisation to its stakeholders (Fawkes & Gregory, 2000; 122). Organisations therefore have become more transparent and more porous, and their ability to control information and communication has been largely reduced. It also implies that the internet makes the distinction between those who provide information and those who receive it increasingly blurred. Today's technology also accommodates real-time dialogue between people, including organisations and their stakeholders (Argenti, 2006; 359). This supports the notion that unidirectional messages sent from organisations to various target groups in a one-way asymmetrical fashion needs to be replaced by a more involving model of communication and it underscores the importance of organisations being able to respond quickly to inquiries. With increased pressure to provide information quickly follows that the ability of organisations to plan their communication is decreasing as well (Argenti, 2006; 360). Among the internal challenges, Argenti points to employees today being enabled by technology such as blogs and social networking sites to be "*themselves corporate communication managers and potential publishers*" (2006; 363). Besides the possibility that internal constituencies will disseminate damaging information on a worldwide basis, some external challenges exists, including how new information technology has enabled groups to organise in internet-based activism (2006; 364).

### *Opportunities*

The technological developments act not only as a threat to organisations; they also entail some opportunities. Firstly, technology has enabled organisations to reach more diverse audiences by allowing them to visualise information in new ways (Argenti, 2006; 364). It has also given communication professionals located outside corporate headquarters an easy link to keeping themselves updated on the organisation's activities (Ibid.; 365). If organisations choose to take advantage of new technology in their corporate communication, they will be rewarded:

*"By taking advantage of technology, companies can present coordinated, consistent sets of communication to all of their constituents and take advantage of*

*opportunities that may have been unavailable before the advent of technology”*  
(Argenti, 2006; 365).

One way to take advantage of technology is by establishing one or more corporate blogs. Since blogs are the focal point of this thesis, I will devote some space to briefly outline the characteristics and advantages of this type of media platform. Blogs are typically referred to as online diary-like websites where posts are displayed in reverse-chronological order. Participants are usually able to comment on the various posts, illustrating the conversational potential of blogs (Scoble & Israel, 2006; 25). The writer and publisher of a blog is referred to as a blogger and in a business context, one of the main functions of a corporate blogger is to give the organisation a human voice which vocals his/her opinion and comments on current issues (Kristensen & Madsen-Mygdal, 2007: 44; Holm, 2006: 34). Thereby, a corporate blog allows the organisation to express opinions and attitudes which would be difficult to voice in more traditional media/genres, e.g. the corporate newsletter. It should be noted, however, that in theory, including blogs in the communication landscape will make it increasingly difficult for organisations to coordinate all communication. This is due to the online media's call for dynamics, flexibility and interactivity – competencies which are quite contradictory to centralised communication in a tight structure (Sandstrøm, 2005: 169). This can be exemplified when organisations decide to use corporate blogs in their corporate communication. As blogs are not only posts published by the organisation but also entails an interactive element in the form of comments between the author and other active participants allowing for a dialogue between them, it is implied that this interaction cannot to a great extent be planned and is highly personal. Thus, blogs should be seen as an arena for conversation rather than merely a channel for distributing messages, and it has been argued that such conversations can not be approached from a control perspective (Baron & Philbin, 2009: 1).

## **2.2. Crisis Communication**

After having presented the overall framework of corporate communication, I will in the following dive into its subfield, crisis communication. This part of the literature review is supposed to provide a foundation for discussing Arla's communication during the crisis. First, I provide a definition of the concept 'crisis' and then present a review of the existing literature on crisis communication before giving a more in-depth presentation of the primary theory of

crisis communication utilised in this thesis, namely W. Timothy Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory, including its basic premises and points of critique. Lastly, I present a range of suggestions as to how the field of crisis communication is affected by recent technological developments, i.e. the Internet.

### **2.2.1. Defining 'Crisis' and Introducing Crisis Communication**

The crisis management literature offers a vast amount of different definitions of a 'crisis'. However, in order not to induce more ambiguity than necessary and to clearly display how I approach crises as a subject, I have chosen to work with only one in this dissertation:

*"A crisis is the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes"* (Coombs, 2007: 2-3).

Based on this definition, I will consider a crisis as something unpredictable (but not unexpected) that is perceived as inappropriate by important stakeholders because it violates their expectations of the organisation and which have the potential to generate negative outcomes for the organisation, its stakeholders, and the industry. It should be noted that the events only bear a *potential* to negatively impact the organisations. This is important because research has shown that crises can actually generate positive outcomes for organisations (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2009). It is reasoned that it is not possible for an organisation that has gone through a crisis to simply return to a pre-crisis state. Instead it should take the opportunity to renew itself to become better than before the crisis (Ibid). Furthermore, the basic premise of crisis communication is to avoid negative outcomes of a crisis through appropriate communicative handling of it.

Danish researchers Johansen & Frandsen add a related definition, namely that of a double crisis:

*"A double crisis is a crisis, where the original crisis is superposed by a "communication crisis", in so far as the company is unable to manage the communication processes, which should conduce to the handling of the original crisis"* (Johansen & Frandsen, 2007: 79 – my translation).

This definition is included because Arla's handling of the crisis being examined in my research at one point led to such a communication crisis. I will return to this in the analysis part of this thesis.

The literature on crisis communication is rather disjointed but can be roughly divided into two categories, each reflecting a different focus: the *form* and *content* of crisis communication responses, respectively (Coombs, 2009: 103). The first category of research focuses on *how* organisations should respond to crises. It is largely build upon early practitioner ideas about how organisations should rhetorically communicate their messages and is therefore seen as a normative approach to crisis communication. These form guidelines include advice on organisations being *quick*, *open*, *accurate*, and *consistent* (Coombs, 2009: 103-104). The latter refers to organisations speaking *with one voice*. Because crises demand the expertise of different organisational members, there will often be different spokespersons in a crisis. According to Coombs, this multivocality entails the risk that the organisation's messages become contradictory (Coombs, 2009: 104). Such inconsistency should be avoided because consistency is of pivotal importance for the credibility of the response (Coombs, 2007: 131). It has also been shown in research that organisations which are able to communicate consistent crisis responses across their various stakeholders will enhance their legitimacy while the opposite is the case for organisations that fail to do so (Massey, 2001). Research in the second category, *content*, focuses on *what* is being said organisations' crisis response. It thus has a strategic focus and relates to the goals of the crisis response communication which are to 1) prevent or minimise damage, 2) maintain the organisation's operations, and 3) repair the organisation's reputation (Coombs, 2009: 105).

It has been argued that this categorisation has no relevance in academic research exactly because the category *form* has no theoretical, scientific foundation but rather is purely experience-based (Johansen & Frandsen, 2007: 200). Instead, it has been suggested that a distinction is made between rhetorical research and strategic research (Johansen & Frandsen, 2007: 200-201). The former focuses on what and how organisations communicate and the latter places crisis responses as depending on the situational context including the crisis type, the impact of the crisis, and stakeholders' attribution of crisis responsibility (Johansen & Frandsen, 2007: 201-202). Researchers such as Benoit (1995) and Hearit (2006) are viewed as representatives for the rhetorical research tradition in crisis communication, and as representatives for the more strategic research tradition in crisis communication we find

among others Sturges (1994), Coombs (2006, 2007, 2009), and Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger (2003, 2009) (Johansen & Frandsen, 2007: 202). Since Coombs' research builds on research from both research traditions, his Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) has been chosen as the primary theoretical framework for assessing Arla's crisis responses.

### **2.2.2. Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

The SCCT represents an empirically verified method for evaluating crisis communication efforts in terms of the response strategies used by an organisation in crisis and therefore constitute the background of my analysis of Arla's communication during the Cartoon Crisis. In the following, I will outline the theory and discuss its basic assumptions.

In his research on crisis communication as relationship management, American communication researcher W. Timothy Coombs has tried to synthesise the different crisis responses originating from the rather fragmented research in crisis communication. His theory can be seen as an extension of Benoit's (1995) work on crisis communication as image restoration as it is built on the same fundamental presumptions that 1) corporate communication is a goal-directed activity and 2) maintaining a positive reputation is a central goal of this communication (Coombs, 2009: 109). Besides drawing on Benoit's work, Coombs takes into account the critique made of it by acknowledging the contextual relevance of the crisis response strategies. This is illustrated by his incorporation of elements from a wide range of research areas into his theory. Among these are reputation management, neoinstitutional theory, and attribution theory (Coombs, 2009: 107-109). Coombs' contextualisations will be outlined in the following, but first, I will delineate Sturges model for crisis responses as it relates to the crisis lifecycle and is also incorporated in the SCCT.

#### *Crisis Communication Content and Crisis Lifecycle*

Most researchers primarily deal with reputation repair, but by pointing to Sturges (1994) and his system for organising crisis responses in the post-crisis phase according to three functions, it is emphasised that a full understanding of crisis response communication is needed (Coombs, 2009: 105). Sturges' model links crisis communication content with the lifecycle of a crisis. Shortly put, Sturges suggests that crises are composed of different phases and that organisations should adjust their crisis response strategy including different types of information to the phase they are currently in. Three different types of information that can be



disseminated are: 1) instructing information (information on how stakeholders should protect themselves from physical or financial harm during the crisis), 2) adjusting information (information that can help stakeholders deal psychologically with the effects of the crisis), and 3) internalising information (relates to crisis communication strategies used to protect the organisation's image/reputation during the crisis). It is emphasised by Coombs (2009) that while reputation repair is important in the crisis response phase, "*crisis managers should never attempt to repair a reputation until instructing and adjusting information is provided*" (2009: 113). Furthermore, Coombs suggests that sometimes informational and adjusting information is in itself enough to protect an organisation's reputation – if the crisis represents a minor reputational threat (Ibid.).

Having established that crisis communication is more than just reputation restoration, I will now move on to outline the various contextualisations made by Coombs, before I turn to presenting his Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). The first contextualisation Coombs makes is the inclusion of elements from *reputation management* which deals with how stakeholders perceive the organisation. An organisation's reputation, which is built through a mutually dependent relationship over time between the organisation and its stakeholders, is viewed as a valuable intangible asset (Coombs, 2009: 107). As such, the relation between an organisation and its stakeholders entails both a structural (mutual dependency) and a temporal dimension (relational history). The latter plays a role in how a crisis and an organisations' role in it are perceived by its stakeholders. In this line of thought, it is suggested that crises are a threat to an organisation's reputation whereas its crisis responses serve to protect this asset (Coombs, 2009: 107). The second contextualisation made by Coombs is the application of *neo-institutional theory*, which suggests that organisations seek legitimacy and attain it by complying with the normative demands of their environments (Allen & Caillouet, 1994: 45). This notion is recognised within corporate apologia and impression management from both of which Coombs includes elements in his theory. Keith Michael Hearit (2006) was the first to suggest an incorporation of corporate apologia in crisis management, and his research proposes that organisations use five different strategies to secure coherence between its values and the values of its stakeholders: denial, bolstering, differentiation, transcendence, and dissociation. *Impression management* like corporate apologia deals with legitimacy – whether or not an organisation's activities are conforming to the prevailing rules of its external institutional environment – and the ideas behind are rather similar. However, in a research project, Allen & Caillouet (1994) identified a number of

additional crisis response strategies, and according to Coombs their research is worth including as it has extended the total number of crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2009: 109). The final contextualisation Coombs makes is the inclusion of *attribution theory* in his framework. The presumption behind this is that stakeholders will attribute responsibility for the cause of a crisis either to the organisation or to external factors, and the stronger the attribution of org. responsibility, the greater the reputational threat posed by the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Thus, attribution theory serves to evaluate the reputational threat posed by a crisis and is used to categorise crisis types into three clusters, each corresponding to an associated degree of crisis responsibility (Coombs, 2009: 112)<sup>1</sup>.

Two other factors, crisis history and prior reputation, serves as moderators to the initial organisational threat. If for example the organisation has previously been involved in a similar crisis or has an unfavourable reputation prior to the crisis, the stakeholders will likely attribute a higher degree of organisational crisis responsibility for the current crisis (Coombs, 2009: 111-112). This condition where organisations' relational history affects negatively the perception of organisational crisis responsibility has been termed the *velcro effect* (Coombs & Holladay, 2001: 335).

In the SCCT, the various crisis response strategies identified in image restoration theory (Benoit, 1995), corporate apologia (Hearit, 2006), and impression management (Allen & Caillouet, 1994) have been synthesised. In his works, Coombs has arranged the various response strategies into four clusters that stakeholders perceive as similar: *Deny Strategies*, including *attack the accuser*, *denial*, and *scapegoat*; *Diminish Strategies*, including *excuse* and *justification*; *Rebuild Strategies*, including *compensation* and *apology*; and *Reinforcing Strategies*, including *bolstering* and *ingratiation* (Coombs & Heath, 2006: 205; Coombs, 2009: 111)<sup>2</sup>. This serves the purpose of appropriate response strategies being easily coupled with the type of crisis in question. It should be noted, however, that while the three firstly mentioned clusters of responses correspond to the three clusters of crisis types and thus can be used alone, the forth cluster of reinforcing strategies is supplemental and these should therefore only be used with a primary response strategy (Coombs & Heath, 2006: 205). A thorough description of each strategy will not be given here but is included where it is appropriate in the analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix 1 for a list of the different crisis types and corresponding degrees of crisis responsibility.

<sup>2</sup> See appendix 2 for an overview and description of the different response strategies.

According to the SCCT, the best way for an organisation to respond in a crisis situation in order to protect its reputation is to select the crisis response strategy that matches the reputational threat posed by the crisis (Coombs & Heath, 2006, p. 203). The first step in this process is for the organisation to consider what type of crisis it is facing by assessing its stakeholders' attribution of crisis responsibility. This initial assessment then needs to be moderated according to the organisation's relational history and its prior reputation. Based on this assessment, the SCCT provides guidelines for which crisis response strategy(ies) is appropriate in the situation by arguing that as the level of crisis responsibility increases, the organisation must utilise more accommodative strategies (Coombs, 2009: 112)<sup>3</sup>.

### **2.2.3. Critique of the SCCT**

The SCCT is relatively recently developed and thus has not yet been subject to much criticism. However, Johansen & Frandsen (2007) notes that a critique can be directed at one of the theoretical foundations of it. Namely, the attribution theory, which is built on the assumption that a person's causal attributions of responsibility are determined by the information received by that person, is subject to critique. It is argued that this theory fails to take into account the fundamental attribution error and the existence of attribution asymmetry. The former concerns the human tendency to ascribe behaviour to persons rather than to situations (Försterling, 2001 in Johansen & Frandsen, 2007: 250) and the fact that people attribute differently across various dimensions (Ibid.: 245). The latter relates to the attribution process of humans being asymmetrical as so far as personal behaviours that lead to successful outcomes are ascribed personal characteristics whereas personal behaviours that lead to fiascos are ascribed situational factors and vice-versa (Ting-Toomey, 1999: 153-154). Since Coombs' theory is built partly on the attribution theory, Johansen & Frandsen argue that this critique is directly referable to the SCCT which therefore can be criticised for not recognising organisational stakeholders as being an extremely heterogeneous group (2007: 245).

### **2.2.4. Influence of Digital Media on Crisis Communication**

Digital media are increasingly influencing the field of crisis communication. Although researchers differ in the degree of magnitude they ascribe to the influence of the internet, there seems to be consensus that it needs to be taken into consideration when dealing with

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<sup>3</sup> See appendix 3 for a list of crisis response recommendations provided by the SCCT.

crises and crisis management. In the following, I will briefly outline the different possibilities and challenges entailed in the development in information technology.

Prior to any crisis, online search engines and news feeds have made possible easy scanning of the online world for warning signs about the emergency of the situation and whether it can potentially evolve into a crisis (Coombs, 2007: 102). This means that organisations now have the possibility to access and participate in conversations about it which previously took place outside its reach, e.g. inside people's homes or in workplace canteens (Kristensen & Madsen-Mygdal, 2007: 7).

Additionally, if an issue evolves into a crisis, stakeholders will search online for information and increasingly, lack of an online presence in crisis situations will become a liability for organisations (see for example Coombs, 2007: 101; Fearn-Banks, 2007: 2). Thus, if organisations do not address crises online, stakeholders will wonder why, and the organisations will miss out on a perfect opportunity to tell their side of the story quickly and in unlimited space (Coombs, 2007: 101). Before the advent of the internet, the rule of thumb was for organisations to respond to a crisis within 24 hours. However, due to the new 24-hour news cycle and social media's effect on how we communicate, the reality today is that organisations should rather react within 24 minutes. This also means that the lifecycle of any crisis will likely be compressed, leaving less time to find relevant stakeholders and disseminate the needed information to them as well as to attempt to repair long-term damage to the organisation (Moore & Seymour, 2007: 154). Research by Perry, Taylor & Doerfel (2003) and Taylor & Perry (2005) suggest that a growing number of internet-based tools are utilised in organisations' crisis responses. These include both traditional internet tactics and new interactive tactics such as dialogic communication, connecting links, and real-time monitoring (Perry, Taylor & Doerfel, 2003: 215; Taylor & Perry, 2005: 212). Despite the overwhelming amount of opportunities related to new media available to organisations, crisis communication researchers agree that internet-based crisis responses cannot stand alone (Coombs, 2007; Hallahan, 2009; Fearn-Banks, 2007). Thus, an integrated approach seems necessary where both traditional and new media are part of the crisis response.

In the aftermath of a crisis, the internet can be a valuable source for evaluating the crisis management efforts (Coombs, 2007: 172). This is due to internet-based communication being stored online which thus makes it possible for the organisation to access it in the post-mortem of the crisis in order to evaluate it and learn from it.

Developments in information technologies also mean that organisations need to prepare themselves for new types of crises. Moore & Seymour use the metaphor of python crises and cobra crises to distinguish between different types of crisis (2005: 34). A python crisis is one that slowly squeezes the life out of its victim whereas a cobra crisis strikes fast and paralyses its victim. It is argued that due to new information technologies, organisations will likely encounter more cobra crises, such as system attacks, instant boycotts, and rumours (Moore & Seymour, 2005: 34 + 50-57). This increases the urgency of a quick response in crisis situations. If we move away from the metaphor, the existing literature on crisis communication has more concretely identified the new types of crisis as *internet-circulated rumours*, where misinformation about an organisation is forwarded on blogs, emails or social networking sites, and *cyber crises*, where persons or groups set up rogue web sites designed to attack an organisation (Fearn-Banks, 2007: 80). Hallahan offers an alternative categorisation of internet-based crises and suggests that they can be broadly grouped into 1) outages and unplanned disruptions in service, 2) harmful comments, hoaxes and rumours, and 3) outright attacks by detractors (Hallahan, 2009: 416).

Lastly, by making everyone a publisher of uncensored information online, developments in communication technologies affect the power relationship between organisations and their publics by giving a voice to stakeholders that were once silent, including NGOs and individual citizens (Moore & Seymour, 2005: 42). The internet has also allowed for groups who wish to harm an organisation to easily and quickly promote their cause and assemble supporter for it. This altered relationship where stakeholders are no longer merely receivers of carefully crafted messages but rather active participators in a dialogue with the organisation implies that transparency should be the foundation of future crisis strategies (Moore & Seymour, 2005: 44). This could for example include corporate encouragement of employee weblogs (Moore & Seymour, 2005: 129). As previously discussed, this development suggests that organisations will face the dilemma of balancing control of information (including the content of their messaging) with engagement and dialogue (including encouraging and displaying diverse views and sensitive issues). This reorganisation of communication has also been recognised by Hallahan who suggests that as a result of incorporating interactive media, organisations will become more structurally flattened, highly decentralised, interactive, collaborative, and transparent (Hallahan, 2009: 413).

### 2.3. Concluding Remarks on Literature Review

In the literature review, I have laid out the fields of corporate communication and crisis communication, respectively. Both management concepts have been and are still subjects of extensive research and debate among practitioners and scholars. However, from the review it should be clear that the concept of consistency plays a big role in both fields. In corporate communication it is widely celebrated as an ideal for organisations' total communications. Additionally, organisations' ability to create and maintain a favourable reputation with key stakeholders is largely ascribed to their ability to ensure coherent communication. Similarly, within the field of crisis communication, the effectiveness of crisis communication is largely described as a function of the organisation's ability to communicate consistently their response strategies, thereby increasing organisational legitimacy. I therefore introduce the concept *managing consistency* in order to capture how the concept is understood and approached in terms of organisation of communication within the organisation.

Since this research project deals with corporate blogs and their role in crisis communication, a section was included in both reviews on how the fields have been affected by digital media. In relation to corporate communication, I argued that developments in information technology and particularly in digital media present a challenge to the corporate communication ideal of integration and consistency. On one hand, the literature suggests that more channels require more control. On the other hand, new internet-based media such as blogs and social networking sites are characterised by personal involvement, dialogue and transparency and demands room for flexibility. Thus, they cannot be approached from a control perspective. When it comes to crisis communication, the internet has been described as a double-edged sword because it creates opportunities for new types of crises to affect organisations, while simultaneously giving them access to more crisis communication channels. The vast number of countervailing processes entailed by the internet and digital media can be summarised as follows:

- The internet demands an increased sense of urgency but also offers the tools to deal with this urgency,
- Increased fragmentation of audiences and media might negatively influence the ability of organisations to present their crisis response strategies in a consistent manner but new media also allows for rather specific targeting of stakeholders

- Digital media entails new types of crises that organisations need to deal with but also allows for organisations to utilise a range of new interactive tactics in their crisis communication.

I would like to emphasise two main points which can be drawn from the literature review: 1) according to the corporate communication literature, maintaining consistency between all organisational communications should always be the goal of an organisation's corporate communication function, and 2) new digital media such as blogs cannot be controlled and therefore, the use of such will potentially disrupt the consistency of an organisation's crisis communication.

Overall, it arguably appears that a tension exists between the quest for consistency and the current adherence to a dialogue approach to stakeholder communication. These two themes will thus guide my analysis. In the analysis part of this thesis, I will assess if/how this tension comes to show in the case of Arla and the Cartoon Crisis and how the organisation deals with it. It will also be examined whether/how consistency in crisis communication is possible when an organisation adds blogs to its communication landscape.

### 3. Methodology

My thesis is an empirical examination of the field of crisis communication with an applied perspective on the use of blogs in crisis communication and how this informs our understanding of consistency. The research design is a case study and my research process can be described as having different phases, the first being a document analysis, the second an interview part.

In connection with the first phase of my research and prior to actual analysis, I began my data collection through archival research. The empirical data used to evaluate the role of Arla's blog in its crisis communication and the organisation's ability to communicate consistently was accessed on Arla Food's website and through Infomedia. This part of the empirical foundation of my research consists of real world crisis communication as it presented itself in blog posts (incl. comments) and newsletters retrieved from Arla's website as well as in external media. A second element of this phase was an extensive literature review conducted in order to establish the theoretical foundations for the two areas of research combined in my



research as well as a framework for analyzing and discussing my data. My analysis of the documents used as a method *constructionist grounded theory*. I first read every document and coded each in search of patterns in Arla's communication. I was then able to synthesize these patterns into broader crisis response categories. In doing so, I drew on my theoretical knowledge of crisis communication. The existence of the identified categories in the various documents could then be compared. This also happened in two steps. First, I examined the existence of various categories identified on the blog to assess if consistency was present within that platform. I then examined the appearance of the different categories across the various platforms in order to establish whether they were externally consistent.

The second phase of my research was an interview part. In order to investigate the internal implications of using blogs as a crisis communication tool, an informant interview with Stakeholder Relations Manager and so-called 'blogmom' in Arla, Sanne Vinther, was conducted. Prior to the interview, my informant had received a list of proposed questions to give her some time to prepare. The interview was recorded on Dictaphone with consent from my informant. The aim of the interview was to gain an insight into my respondent's knowledge of the organisation of communication in Arla and the experiences related to the use of blogs in crises.

The final research conclusions presented in this thesis are based on my analysis of the crisis communication content as well as analysis results of the interview and are balanced against the inferences from current literature. Such a complex methodological approach provides a comprehensive review of the problem. Therefore, the final conclusions of the study are arguably based on practical experiences of a real world crisis and actual crisis communication as well as on the academic literature available to date.

### **3.1. Methods**

Having thus described my research process and mentioned the different methods employed in my research, I will in the following present each method more thoroughly, including a discussion of its premises and possible limitations.



### 3.1.1. The Case Study

As previously stated, my research project represents a single case study. This research design has been defined as “*an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident*” (Yin, 1994: 13). Single case studies are especially practicable when working with cases that are critical, unique/extreme, or revelatory (Yin, 1994: 38-40). A *critical case* is one that represents a critical test of current theories, models, assumptions or practises (Yin, 1994: 38). Therefore, the purpose of selecting this type of case is to “*achieve information which permits logical deduction of the type, “if this is (not) valid for this case, then it applies to all (no) cases”*” (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 79). One example of such case could be choosing an organisation with a prior history of innovation to test prevailing theories of “barriers to innovation” as a reason for failed innovations (Yin, 1994: 40). If in that case, failure of innovations cannot be contributed to barriers to innovation, then it can be logically deducted that this is not the case in (most) other cases and that there must be other reasons behind. Similarly, the case being examined in this thesis is used to test prevailing theories on crisis communication and corporate communication and the role played by consistency in these. *Unique or extreme cases* are cases which “*reveal more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied*”, and they are particularly well-suited when the purpose of the research is “*to obtain information on unusual cases which can be especially problematic or especially good in a more closely defined sense*” (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 79). My case arguably also falls under this definition. Firstly, it represents a situation without precedence and secondly, due to its scope it can be used to investigate a range of different phenomena related to crisis communication, e.g. the role of culture in crises, the political dimension of crises, or as in my case, the role of blogs in crises communication. Lastly, a *revelatory case* is one which gives a researcher access to a common situation previously inaccessible to scientific observation (Yin, 1994: 41). An example of such case could be a situation where an otherwise closed system (e.g. an organisation or a specific population) allows the researcher access and an opportunity to gain a new understanding of the system which can then stimulate further research.

As stated above, the case I work with can be characterised as being both critical and unique/extreme, thereby meeting two of the three possible rationales for a single case study. The research design is thus arguably appropriate evaluated against the purpose of this thesis.

The case study method, however, has been subject to criticism from researchers in various fields. In particular, it has been criticised for 1) being unable to contribute to scientific development because one cannot generalise based on a single case, 2) being usable only to generate hypotheses, 3) producing less valuable knowledge than general, theoretical knowledge, 4) containing a bias towards verification, and 5) being unable to develop general propositions and theories (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 66-67). Each of these points of criticism has been refuted by Bent Flyvbjerg in his *Making Social Science Matter* (2001). In the following, I will ascribe to Flyvbjerg's argumentation and present those counterarguments which are particularly relevant in this case.

Firstly, by taking into consideration how case studies have occupied a central place in many great discoveries (e.g. Galileo's rejection of Aristotle's law of gravity) and suggesting that the creation of knowledge extends beyond simply generalising from large samples, Flyvbjerg argues that it is indeed possible to generalise from a single case: "*One can often generalize on the basis of a single case, and the case study may be central to scientific development via generalization as supplement or alternative to other methods*" (2001: 77). Secondly, it can be argued that if the objective is to obtain *in-depth knowledge* about a subject, random sampling is not the most appropriate strategy. Some cases – namely, extreme cases, critical cases or paradigmatic cases – reveal more information about the subject matter than randomly selected samples and thus, the strategic choice of case can potentially add greatly to the generalisability of a case study (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 75 + 78-79). Thirdly, acknowledging that one can generalise on the basis of a single case it is then possible to refute the second point of critique and rather suggest that case studies among other research activities can be helpful in both generating *and* testing hypotheses (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 77). Fourthly, since case studies allow researchers to test their preconceived notions directly on real-life situations and thereby often results in researchers having to revise their hypotheses, Flyvbjerg (2001) argues that "*it is falsification and not verification, which characterizes the case study*" (p. 82-83). Fifthly and finally, as a counterargument to the criticism that case studies can not be used to develop general theories, Flyvbjerg (2001) proposes that while it is indeed difficult and perhaps undesirable to summarize case studies, the method is still a highly valuable contributor to "*the cumulative development of knowledge*" (p. 88).

Based on this argumentation, I argue that the case study method is both relevant and valid in my research. In particular, my choice of a case which can be characterised as being extreme

and possibly phenomenon revealing, and the objective of the research being to obtain in-depth knowledge of this particular situation buttress the argument that this is a legitimate method for studying the subject.

### 3.1.2. Constructivist Grounded Theory

My approach to analysing the texts, which constitute part of my empirical data, can be described as an interaction of the inductive and deductive approach. In the initial coding, I apply *constructivist grounded theory* (Charmaz, 2004), thereby freeing myself from being ‘locked in’ by theoretical concepts. However, in my subsequent work into the subject, I use theoretical concepts to reflect over the empirical data. Thereby, I am able to explore whether the case can inform novel strategies omitted from prevailing theories on crisis communication without neglecting the latter. In the following, grounded theory in its original form will be presented before I move on to explaining the alternative version of it, constructivist grounded theory.

Grounded Theory was developed as an alternative to the prevailing hypothetic-deductive research methodology in the 1960s by its founding fathers, Glaser & Strauss, who offered a methodological framework for developing theory directly from empirical data (Kelle, 2007: 192). Briefly explained, the idea is that categories are inherent in empirical data and that these will *emerge* from the data set, presupposing that the researcher has sufficient *theoretical sensitivity* and applies a technique of *constant comparison* (Ibid.: 191). The analytic process starts when the researcher initially *codes* the empirical data and labels different phenomena temporarily (Clarke, 2003: 557). In other words, coding refers to the researcher finding and marking all the different text passages that say something about a certain topic (Kelle, 2007: 193). By constantly comparing the occurrence of various codes in different parts of the data, these can eventually be grouped into *grounded categories* which over time evolve to a *grounded theory*. Furthermore, it is argued to be pivotal to the process that the researcher employs *theoretical sensitivity* – that is, has “*an ability to see relevant data and to reflect upon empirical data material with the help of theoretical terms*” (Kelle, 2007: 193). The process is carried on until *saturation* is reached and a *substantive theory* can be developed based on these grounded categories (Clarke, 2003: 557). It is argued that when multiple substantive theories about the subject matter have been generated, a more formal theory can be developed (Clarke, 2003: 557).

The main point of criticism of the classical grounded theory is its assumption that a researcher can approach empirical data without being prejudiced by presumptions – that is, as an unbiased observer (Charmaz, 2007: 509). As such, the method implies an adherence to a positivist ideal which is in conflict with my constructivist epistemology. Therefore, I use instead a refined version of it developed by Charmaz (2004) called *constructivist grounded theory*. This method adopts tools and guidelines from grounded theory without subscribing to its objectivist, positivist assumptions (Charmaz, 2004: 509). With that, I acknowledge that my data can never be a direct reflection of reality because it is affected by my theoretical knowledge and I recognise that I play a role in constructing meaning of it. But by adhering to this method, I stay open to the possibility of new categories emerging from my analysis which are not theoretically predefined. As such, this approach allows for a constant interplay between a deductive and inductive approach instead of being either one or the other. If alternatively I had used the classical grounded theory in my analysis, my research would have been solely inductive and I would not be able to draw on existing theories in my analysis.

### **3.1.3. The Qualitative Research Interview**

In order to understand the internal consequences of using corporate blogs in crisis situations, I have interviewed Stakeholder Relations Manager in Arla Foods, Sanne Vinther. Since I am an outsider to Arla's internal operations in relation to the events under investigation, Vinther serves as a substitute observer (Kalleberg, 1982 in Andersen, 2003: 211), and the interview can therefore be characterised as an *informant interview* (Andersen, 2003: 211). I acknowledge that the knowledge created in the interview is a result of the interaction between Vinther and me. However, given my constructivist approach to this research project, which implies that conversation is key to knowledge creation, this more than anything fosters my understanding of the subject matter. I also acknowledge that interviews are often characterised by some level of power asymmetry between the researcher and the interviewee and thus, that the interview is not a reciprocal interaction between two equal parties (Kvale, 2003: 131). However, since my respondent can be described as being an "expert" qua her profession and intimate knowledge of the research subject, I find it reasonable to argue that the power asymmetry in this case is not an issue. While I would have preferred also to interview Senior Manager for Arla's Consumer Dialogue and Communication, Maja Møller, this was not possible due to acute internal problems. Additionally, I would have liked to conduct an

interview with Arla blogger, Louis Honoré, but since he has left the dairy company, this was not an option.

In order to guide the actual research, I created an interview protocol in which the topics to be discussed and suggested questions were sketched. The interview was subsequently transcribed but attention was paid to the consequences of transforming verbal language to written language (Kvale, 2003: 167-168). Some researchers have criticised the qualitative research interview for being non-scientific and for lacking objectivity due to the human interaction (Kvale, 2003: 68 and p. 72). I concede that by adhering to a constructivist approach, the knowledge created in the interview can not be objective in the sense that it suggests a universal truth. However, it should be noted that ‘objectivity’ itself is a rather subjective concept (Kvale, 2003: 72).

### 3.2. Data

Since the introduction of the blog medium in Arla in late 2005, the organisation has been involved in three larger crises. The first one, the so-called “Hirtshals Case” in which Arla was accused of engaging in anti-competitive behaviour, was already ongoing when Arla introduced its blogs. One of Arla’s blogs was used to comment on the crisis in its late phases. However, since that case does not capture the use of blogs in the entire crisis life cycle, I find that it is inappropriate to use for this project. The second crisis is the Cartoons Crisis of 2006. During this crisis, blogs – alongside other media channels – were used to communicate through the entire life cycle of the crisis. This has resulted in a vast amount of data which can inform the objective of this investigation and therefore represents a highly appropriate case. Finally, the so-called Chinese Milk Scandal of September 2008, where an Arla subsidiary in China was involved in a crisis where several newborns died after consuming milk powder contaminated with melamine, could also have been the subject of my research. However, only one blog post addressed the crisis and that post only provoked one comment. Thus, that crisis should perhaps be seen as an example of when *not* to use blogs in crisis communication rather than an exemplar of crisis communication using blogs.

The empirical foundation of my research consists of Arla’s written crisis communication from the time frame of January 26, 2006 to December 14, 2006. Thereby, communication from the first day of the boycott until the publication of the last blog post concerning the crisis is

covered. The documents examined include 14 blog posts (including a total of 201 comments<sup>4</sup>), 25 newsletters<sup>5</sup>, and 53 articles from a representative sample of large national newspapers<sup>6</sup> in which Arla has made statements about the crisis<sup>7</sup>. Blog posts and newsletters have been extracted from archives on Arla's website: [www.arlafoods.dk](http://www.arlafoods.dk). According to an Infomedia search on the words 'Arla Foods', a total of 451 news articles covered the organisation during the period. However, several articles are more or less identical and/or use similar quotes from Arla. Furthermore, only articles reporting statements from spokespersons from Arla has been considered. As a result, 53 articles which are particularly significant have been selected to represent Arla's crisis communication in external media. I have limited myself by not including internal communication relating to the crisis situation as well as from and not commenting on technical matters associated with the use of blogs.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. Introduction

In the following analysis, I examine the role of blogs in Arla's crisis communication including its effect on the organisation's management of communication and its ability to communicate consistently. As previously suggested, tensions seem to exist between two contemporary ideals, namely between consistency and a dialogic approach to communication. The purpose of the analysis is thus to investigate empirically whether this tension is real and demonstrate how it possibly presents itself in a real-life situation. This is done, in order to make suggestions as to how organisations can manage consistency when blogs are implemented in their crisis communications.

My analysis centres around two central themes, both of which are informed by the literature review: 1) The management of communication in Arla and 2) Consistency in crisis communication within the blog and across different media. The purpose of this division is to

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<sup>4</sup> The rationale behind my inclusion of comments and replies to blog posts is that the interactive element of the blog medium can potentially affect negatively internal consistency of communication on the blog.

<sup>5</sup> As more newsletters are available in Danish than in English, all references are made to Danish originals.

<sup>6</sup> According to Index Danmark/Gallup, the largest newspapers in Denmark in January 2006 were as follows: Jyllands-Posten (14.1%), Politiken (10.2%), EkstraBladet (8.9%), BT (8.9%), and Berlingske Tidende (8.3%). Source: <http://www.tns-gallup.dk/Aktualitetstal/Aktualitetstal%20aug2005-nov2006.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> All elements of my empirical foundation are included in appendices 7-9. However, only blog posts, newsletters, and articles referenced in my analysis are apparent from the reference list. Also, it should be noted that I have taken the liberty to translate all quotes in Danish to English – original content is available in appendices.

provide insights about both the internal and the external dimension of consistency. Firstly, focus will be on the internal dimension and I will demonstrate how Arla manages its communication. This part will include an analysis of how Arla's communication is organised and how the inclusion of blogs in Arla's media landscape has been experienced, including whether it has affected this organisation and the understanding of consistency within the dairy company. Secondly, I investigate in depth Arla's responses to the Cartoons Crisis as apparent in its external communication on three platforms. This is done in order to gain insight into the external dimension of consistency. The idea is that by looking at how different strategies appear on and across various platforms, I will be able to assess whether Arla's communication is in fact consistent, thus contributing to an understanding of concrete practices related to consistency.

#### **4.2. Crisis Context**

In late 2005, the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten carried 12 satirical cartoons of the Muslim prophet Mohammed, thereby staging itself as the centre of conflict later referred to as the worst Danish crisis relating to foreign politics since WW2 (Hansen & Hundevadt, 2006). In Middle Eastern countries, the consequences were particularly profound with an almost total boycott of Danish goods starting in January 2006. Losses related to the boycott befell primarily Arla Foods, which as a direct effect lost approximately DKK kr. 400 million in a few months (Arla Foods, 2006p). As should be apparent from this brief introduction, the Cartoon Crisis was highly complex and without precedent because it was all at once national, global, political, religious and commercial. The numbers of parties involved were vast and they represented a highly diverse group. For Arla, the crisis primarily took place in the Middle East, but since it was part of the larger Cartoon Crisis, the context is multinational and intercultural. The organisation communicated to a heterogeneous target group situated in a variety of cultures, but since information technology allows for access to all communication for Danish stakeholders, the actual effect was that all communication from Arla reached all of these. The victims of the crisis were primarily those who were hurt emotionally by the cartoons as well as companies whose products were being boycotted only because they were Danish. Additionally, victims of the boycott (the sub-crisis) were primarily Danish and Swedish milk farmers who carried Arla's financial loss and those Danish employees who lost their job due to the crisis and Middle Eastern employees who were physically threatened because they worked for Arla.



Judged from the framework of the SCCT, the Cartoons Crisis is arguably an example of a human-induced crisis. Generally, this would imply that it could have been prevented and therefore, the attribution of organisational crisis responsibility would be rather strong. However, as Arla did not perform the actions that lead to the crisis but still bore the bulk of its consequences, this crisis is arguably more similar in character to a natural disaster or product tampering in terms of crisis responsibility attributed to the organisation. This would suggest minimal crisis responsibility. But it should also be noted that, while not having a history of a similar crisis, Arla's reputation prior to the crisis was not the best, and with reference to the velcro-effect, I therefore argue that taken together, the level of crisis responsibility attributed Arla by its stakeholders was minimal to low.

### **4.3. Managing Consistency – Internal Dimension**

Below, I examine how communication is managed in Arla. This part of the analysis is supposed to assess the internal dimension of consistency. As such, the purpose of the analysis is non-normative in that I do not wish to make suggestions as to whether the consistency ideal is something to aspire to or not. Rather, the aim is to investigate how management of consistency takes place in practise.

#### **4.3.1. Strategy and Structure**

With the increased acknowledgement that product branding has become insufficient as a driver of company success and that the image of the corporation as a whole has a huge impact on consumer preferences, organisations are increasingly centralising their communication efforts in corporate communication departments who are responsible for the overall coordination of corporate messages. The same is assumedly true in the case of Arla, who has its corporate communication department located at its headquarters in Viby, Denmark.

According to Sanne Vinther, Stakeholder Relations Manager in Arla, the general communication strategy of the department is via dialogue to create understanding of and knowledge about Arla's attitudes and actions to three groups of stakeholders: 1) co-operative members, 2) employees, and 3) a highly diverse group of external stakeholders (incl. consumers, citizens, press, and other secondary stakeholders) (Vinther, 2010, l. 12-19). While



this way of categorising stakeholders serves to enhance the effectiveness and appropriateness of Arla's communication in terms of messaging and choice of communication channel (Vinther, 2010, l. 20-22, l. 104-111, l. 125-137 and l. 141-146), Vinther acknowledges that today, it is impossible to keep information from floating between them (Vinther, 2010, l. 19-20). Furthermore, several kinds of stakeholders can be said to belong to more than one group, e.g. employees are also in many cases consumers (Vinther, 2010, l. 141-143).

Arla's corporate communication department is a staff function referencing directly to the CEO (Vinther, 2010, l. 85-87). This vertical structure allows for direct access to decision makers. Thus, decisions regarding corporate communication can be made faster. This is particularly important in a crisis situation where the time pressure is strong and decisions have to be made at great pace. Furthermore, by placing the department with direct reference to the organisation's CEO, Arla's top management displays a great degree of support for the function, thereby legitimising it (Vinther, 2010, l. 87-90). The department is responsible for all general communication, whereas direct consumer communication is handled by the individual markets. However, each market refers formally to the corporate communication department in Denmark. This is due to Arla wanting to ensure integration and consistency between communications floating from various Arla divisions in different markets and thereby that the organisation as a whole speaks with one voice (Vinther, 2010, l. 66-71 + 214-216). Furthermore, integration is sought through horizontal integration by having a weekly teleconference between the people responsible for communication to the individual markets (Vinther, 2010, l. 74-75). Besides bearing the responsibility for coordinating and integrating communication from different markets and handling all general communication to the three aforementioned stakeholder groups, the department is also responsible for Arla's blogs, which are used primarily to discuss issues relating to Arla's attitude on various issues or ethical concerns (Vinther, 2010, l. 155-156 and 161). However, it seems clear that in relation to these, the corporate communication department primarily plays a supporting role. It trains bloggers and assist them when they request help. Blog guidelines do exist, but these have been worked out in corporation with the bloggers and are additionally broadly formulated as advises rather than limiting instructions (Vinther, 2010, l. 649-650).

Other elements of the horizontal structure include clear communication strategies, information sharing, and council meetings. Every time the department has made a new strategy for Arla's communication, it is shared with those who need to know about it e.g.

employees working with Arla's direct consumer communication platform, Arla Forum (Vinther, 2010, l. 206-208). Sanne Vinther explains that the department automatically knows exactly who to inform in case of a crisis or some other event which demands quick dissemination of information. However, since this mental checklist is not written down anywhere, this kind of coordination seems to be highly informal and implicit (Vinther, 2010, l. 218-222 and 228). Thereby it arguably represents a weakness in Arla's crisis handling – or information sharing in general – because the implicit nature of the checklist makes it highly dependent on the few people knowing about it. During the Cartoon Crisis, the department was also responsible for daily meetings where the pulse of the situation was felt and evaluated, and information on recent developments and communication initiatives was shared among members of the crisis team (Vinther, 2010, l. 301-302).

Arla is indeed seeking to communicate consistently and to live up to the ideal of integrating all communication. However, the freedom enjoyed by the corporate bloggers in Arla suggests that there are exceptions to this. Unlike employees responsible for consumer communication on Arla Forum and other communicators in Arla, bloggers do not receive a brief stating how they should communicate a new strategy each time the corporate communication department formulates one (Vinther, 2010, l. 245-247). Additionally, it is entirely up to the individual blogger to decide what to write about and which attitudes to present to various issues – both positive and negative (Vinther, 2010, l. 249 and 278-281). Because of this, the blogs are, according to Sanne Vinther, exactly the place where Arla risks projecting inconsistent attitudes and opinions (2010, l. 247-248). Surprisingly, however, little efforts are made by the organisation to reduce this risk and there is absolutely no internal censoring of the blogs (Vinther, 2010, l. 276). On the contrary, some degree of inconsistency between what is communicated on blogs and from the corporate communication department is welcomed because it is seen as a way to create trust in the blogger and thereby legitimacy for the blog (Vinther, 2010, l. 922-936). In the words of Sanne Vinther, a little inconsistency on the blogs validates what Arla communicates through other channels because it offers a personal interpretation and presentation (2010, l. 942-945). The keyword seems to be honesty; if the blogger is always in agreement with official statements and communicates this on the blog in the form of a newsletter, it can never be believable (Vinther, 2010, l. 933-936).

#### 4.4. Managing Consistency – External Dimension

In the following, I present my analysis of Arla's crisis communication during the Cartoons Crisis. As previously stated, the purpose of looking at Arla's communication in terms of crisis response strategies is to investigate the organisation's ability to communicate consistently within and across various media platforms during a crisis in order to gain insight into how the consistency concept displays itself in actual communication efforts. Thus, I am not aiming at testing the appropriateness of contemporary crisis communication models, but rather use Coombs' SCCT as a frame for my analysis – not as a check list for acceptable communication in that particular situation. Before assessing which crisis response strategies I have identified on each of the examined media platforms, I will briefly present each media in terms of its background (if appropriate) and its primary target group(s). Since the blog medium plays a pivotal role in my research project, I devote a few additional lines to describing this medium's role in Arla compared with the other two types of communication channels.

##### *Blog*

The medium was introduced in Arla in late 2005 as part of a change process towards greater openness, incl. a dialogic approach to communication. Generally, Arla wanted to become less formal and more personal in its consumer communication, and blogs were seen as one way to facilitate the desired dialogue (Vinther, 2010, l. 419-425). The primary objective of the blogs was twofold. Firstly, Arla needed a channel through which it could reach its critics and thereby take a part in debates mentioning Arla in the blogosphere. Secondly, the organisation wanted to project an image of Arla as being willing to open their windows to the public (Bo, 2006). One of the blogs, "*Between the Lines*"<sup>8</sup>, hosted by Louis Honoré, Public Relations Manager in Arla at the time, was used extensively during the Cartoons Crisis, where it stood its test as a crisis communication tool. Honoré blogged about the crisis on his own initiative, and by virtue of his position as the public relations manager of Arla, his use of the blog in that situation naturally became quite strategic (Vinther, 2010, l. 295-300). It was also a strategic choice made by Arla's corporate communication department to use blogs to monitor daily the state of the crisis by assessing comments from all publics active on either Arla's own blogs and/or on external blogs (Vinther, 2010, l. 301). Thereby, the blog was functioning as a monitor of crisis developments, as a crisis communication channel targeting in particular Arla critics, and as a feeder for Arla's crisis communication via other media channels during the crisis.

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<sup>8</sup> The blog is no longer active, but its content is archived on [www.weblogs.arla.dk/mellemlinjerne](http://www.weblogs.arla.dk/mellemlinjerne).

### *Newsletters*

Arla publishes newsletters on its website on a regular basis which are available to everyone, the press included. The organisation also uses traditional press releases as part of its communications; however, they are issued with less frequency<sup>9</sup>. During the Cartoon crisis, Arla issued only two press releases, both of which exclusively contained information on adjustments of the on account price on milk, the newsletters are the focus of the following analysis. Furthermore, as the newsletters are publicly available to all stakeholders including the press, they serve much the same function as a traditional press release.

### *External media*

The final crisis communication platform is external media in the form of news articles carried in the 5 largest national newspapers in Denmark. The reader will discover that the majority of referenced articles in my analysis originate from Jyllands-Posten and Politiken. This is not due to those newspapers being the only ones to report on the crisis. Rather, it can be contributed to my evaluation that these newspapers provided the most significant and elaborated accounts of Arla's communication in this particular case. Since I can only assess the statements from Arla which are actually reported in the news articles, I acknowledge that the articles cannot provide a full picture of Arla's communication efforts in external media. But this type of selectiveness by external media is nonetheless the consequence of communicating through third parties. Furthermore, the limited scope of this dissertation forces me to make some delimitation as to which sources can be included.

#### **4.4.1. Identified Crisis Response Strategies**

My coding and comparison of patterns in Arla's blog posts, newsletters, and news articles identifies different kinds of responses in use during the crisis. Using the SCCT as an overall framework for my analysis, I these are grouped in three clusters: 1) instructing information, 2) adjusting information, and 3) internalising information. Some of the crisis response strategies apparent in Arla's communication are supported by Coombs' SCCT. However, strategies which are not theoretically predefined are also identified, thus illustrating the strength of my research method to add new aspects to existing research areas<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> This was confirmed by Sanne Vinther in a follow-up teleconference on August 31.

<sup>10</sup> An overview of Arla's responses on the various platforms is included in the appendices (appendix 4).

In the following, I will outline the communication strategies in use on the selected platforms during the crisis. The strategies identified on the blog will be discussed and evaluated thoroughly in terms of consistency within the medium. Furthermore, the relation between each identified strategy's utilisation on the blog compared to the other platforms will be discussed in order to assess the consistency across the various communication platforms.

#### 4.4.1.1. Instructing information

The term *instructing information* has been taken from existing literature on crisis communication (see e.g. Sturges, 1994 or Coombs, 2009). This kind of information tells stakeholders how to protect themselves physically and financially from the crisis and also includes business continuity information (Coombs, 2007). I have included it in my analysis primarily because it represents an aspect of crisis communication often overlooked in empirical research in this area (Holladay, 2010). I thus wish to acknowledge the value and importance of it in my analysis. Besides this, it serves – as actual reputation repair strategies – as a framework for investigation of Arla's ability to communicate consistently during the crisis.

In my analysis, I have chosen to consider information on the progression of the boycott as instructing information. While this type of information according to the SCCT should be provided primarily in the build-up and break-out crisis phases<sup>11</sup>, it is present in the majority of the blog posts, covering also later phases of the crisis' lifecycle. An example of instructing information identified on the blog in the boycott's initial phase is presented below. In this excerpt, blog host and public relations manager, Louis Honoré, informs about the situation in the Middle Eastern markets as well as Arla's role in these events:

*“In my time as a public relations manager in Arla Foods, the concern is for the first time paralysed. Consumers in Saudi Arabia are increasingly evading Danish products, Arla's included, and there is nothing we can do about it.”* (Honoré, 2006a, l. 1-3).

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<sup>11</sup> This originates from Sturges' (1994) work on crisis lifecycles. However, it should be noted that in my research, I only use this division as a general reference to certain phases of the crisis. I, thus, do not attempt to categorise in specific detail the individual phases, because I doubt the appropriateness of specifying *specific* dates for when various phases of the crisis occurs and ends and acknowledge that there will often be overlaps between the phases. Furthermore, this case illustrates that a crisis can have several layers – i.e. a super-crisis, a sub-crisis, and a double-crisis – which arguably complicates the matter substantially.

Thereby, the blogger informs stakeholders about the boycott the crisis in order to help them make sense of it and understand the consequences of it related to Arla's business. In the following part of the post, a more precise framing of the situation is provided, where Honoré suggests the reason for the boycott, including linking it to Jyllands-Posten's cartoons. Arla's role is suggested to be that of an underserved victim, and according to the blog host, there is therefore nothing the dairy company can do about the boycott:

*"But in this case, the resentment is not directed at Arla but at Jyllands-Posten and the official Denmark. And there is nothing we can do about it. Urrgh."* (Honoré, 2006a, l. 13-15).

This post displays some kind of resentment on behalf of Arla and it is tied directly to Honoré's statement that the sources of the super-crisis is Jyllands-Posten and the official Denmark – arguably because of the government's (lack of proper) handling of the crisis-triggering events – while the responsibility for the boycott (the sub-crisis) is placed with the religious leaders, consumers, and media in the Middle East.

After 11 days of boycott, Honoré suggests how Arla's business is financially affected by the crisis:

*"Each day we miss trades worth app. 10 million Kroner. And the longer our products are off the shelves in Middle Eastern retail stores, the harder it becomes for us to return [...]."* (Honoré, 2006d, l. 4-7).

This is arguably an example of Honoré offering information on the negative effects on Arla's business continuity and therefore identified as instructing information. The severity of the boycott is emphasised not only by the mentioning of Arla's daily loss but also by the suggesting that the damage done will be long-term.

In order to offer an example of messaging being identified as instructing information in the aftermath of the crisis, an exemplar quote is presented below:

*"Unfortunately, it is a prevalent misunderstanding that Arla is merrily passing butter and cheese over the counter at the same pace as before the boycott. In reality, we have reached a sale of 60 % of sales before the boycott. The loss for each Arla-farmer mounts up to 60,000 Kroner"* (Honoré, 2006h, l.6-8).

As stated in the quote, this information long after the boycott has been terminated can be interpreted as an attempt to correct misconceptions; in this case, the misunderstanding that business operations have returned to pre-boycott conditions. Thus, it serves to inform stakeholders that business continuity is still affected by the crisis and thereby displays that Arla understands the severity of the situation and maintains a grasp of the situation.

My analysis has also recognised this type of information in Arla's newsletters from within the same timeframe. For example, on January 26, a newsletter serving as Arla's first official statement about the boycott was published on its website. Here, the situation in the Middle East is accounted for as follows:

*"Consumers in Saudi Arabia have been urged to boycott Danish goods – including products from Arla Foods [...] "We can confirm that our sales have been affected, says Finn Hansen, Executive Director, Arla Foods. "Some of our customers have informed us that they will cancel orders with us and some stores have removed our products from their shelves."'" (Arla Foods, 2006a, l. 1-2 and 16-18).*

Similarly to Honoré initial blog post, the first newsletter informs about the existence of the boycott and how Arla's business is affected by it, thereby living up to the argumentation that instructing information should precede attempts to repair the organisation's reputation. Generally, most newsletters carry instructing information. While it is suggested by the SCCT guidelines that this kind of information is primarily provided in the build-up and break-out phases of a crisis (Coombs & Heath, 2006), I find it fair to argue that because of the complexity and constant changeability of this particular crisis, it makes sense that Arla provides it throughout its life-cycle. In other words, the crisis seems to demand a constant updating on developments in the Middle East as well as about the financial and human consequences of the boycott in the short and the long term; for example:

*"The boycott of Danish products in the Middle East is now almost total. All Arla's customers in the region have cancelled their orders and sales have come to a standstill in almost all markets. [...] Within the next few days, Arla will decide whether to suspend production for the Middle East." (Arla Foods, 2006c, l. 2-4 and 5-6).*



In later phases of the crisis, instructing information occurs in the form of correction of misunderstandings circulating in Arla's external environment, as exemplified in the following newsletter excerpt:

*"Several media reported Wednesday that Arla supports the idea of building a mosque as a gift to Danish Muslims. That is, however, not correct"* (Arla Foods, 2006h, l. 1-2).

Thereby, my analysis of Arla's newsletters shows that this communication platform is – as was the case with the blog – sometimes used to correct misunderstandings or to address false rumours circulating in Danish media. However, whereas Honoré addresses all sorts of misconceptions on the blog, newsletters seem to deal primarily with rumours and misconceptions related to larger issues. The tactic of addressing rumours is also prevalent in the newsletters with regards to misinformation circulating about Arla having boycotted Israel (Arla Foods, 2006k and Arla Foods, 2006l from February 19 and 20, respectively).

At the peak of the crisis in March, instructing information can also be identified in the newsletters:

*"The bill for the boycott of Danish goods in the Middle East correspond to on average 40,000 Kroner for each of Arla Food's 10,000 Danish and Swedish farmers"* (Arla Foods, 2006g, l. 1-2).

At this point in time, it arguably serves the purpose of informing co-operative members of Arla's – and thereby their – expected losses relating to the crisis. However, by suggesting that it is the *farmers* who will eventually bear the losses related to the crisis, it also has the effect of introducing another victim of the crisis, namely the co-operative members of Arla. Arla's size and dominance on the Danish market prior to the crisis projects an organisation undeserving of sympathy. However, by pointing to milk farmers as being the end-victims, Arla can put a human face on an organisation otherwise known for being all about business and exploiting its monopoly-like position on the Danish market. The effect is assumedly that as a receiver of the message you sympathise with the co-operative members and will likely be less condemning of Arla's role in the affair.



After the termination of the boycott – that is, from April 6 and onwards – instructing information is more or less the only kind of information which can be identified in the newsletters. Generally speaking, besides slight differences relating to the crisis framing, instructing information identified here and on the blog is quite similar.

Besides these two platforms, external media is introduced in my analysis as the final platform being subject to my research. Similarly to the use of instructing information on the blog and in newsletters, I have identified this type of information in communication in external media throughout the crisis and with the same purposes as previously discussed. Due to the constant changeability of the crisis it is difficult or even impossible for Arla to make accurate estimates on the long-run consequences of the crisis in its initial responses. Thus, the instructing information identified in external media about consequences is initially presented quite vaguely in the sense that no suggestions are made about what the actual costs associated with the boycott will be:

*“It is depressing news. We sell nothing in Saudi Arabia. We are still on the shelves in most stores, but we don’t sell anything”* (Louis Honoré quoted in Pedersen & Grund, 2006, l. 11-13).

While, judged from Arla’s communication, impossible for the dairy company to estimate and communicate factual effects of the crisis to its stakeholders, this is, however, achievable at later phases, where the human consequences as well as the boycott’s impact on Arla’s brands become apparent, and financial losses can be calculated and forwarded to relevant stakeholders. For example, the first estimate of actual losses is provided on February 10, where Astrid Gade Nielsen, Corporate Communication Manager, suggests that: *“We have no sales on the markets in the Middle East, and that cost us 10 millions each day”* (Bjerger & Benson, 2006, l. 13-14). After the termination of the boycott, a more precise estimate is offered to Arla’s stakeholders, and the financial losses are now suggested to mount up to 400 million kroner (Pedersen, 2006).

Overall, the instructing information identified in Arla’s communication on the three platforms is primarily appearing as business continuity information. While the category also includes information on how stakeholders should protect themselves physically, this seems to be

unnecessary in this type of crisis, which does not directly threaten the safety of Arla's stakeholders. Since the pattern of communication is rather similar in terms of information being disseminated across on each platform and this being done throughout the crisis, it seems impossible to conclude that instructing information identified in Arla's communication is provided in an inconsistent manner. Rather, the above analysis projects, despite minor nuances, that in its initial framing as well as throughout the lifecycle of the crisis, Arla is able to communicate instructing information consistency within and across the different media platforms analysed. One instance of slight incoherency relates to the expected losses of each co-operative member, which is suggested to mount up to 60,000 Kroner on the blog (Honoré, 2006h) and 40,000 Kroner in newsletters (Arla Foods, 2006g) and external media (Olesen, 2006b). However, in a reply Honoré expounds these difference figures by arguing that the former apply to Danish farmers whereas the latter apply to the average co-operative member, because the Swedish farms are on average smaller than the Danish, thus bearing a smaller loss (Honoré in a reply to comments to Honoré, 2006h, Dec. 19, 13:30). Consequently, this small discrepancy can not be used to argue against consistency existing in Arla's communication.

#### 4.4.1.2. Adjusting Information

Similarly to the term instructing information, the concept *adjusting information* originates from existing crisis communication literature (see for example: Sturges, 1994; Coombs, 2009). Adjusting information tells stakeholders how to cope psychologically with the situation (Coombs, 2007). In other words, an organisation in crisis needs to express sympathy with the sufferers of the crisis and explain what it is doing to prevent a reoccurrence of it (Holladay in Coombs & Holladay, 2010, p. 164). In the following analysis, I therefore consider both explicit expressions of sympathy with stakeholders who are as perceived as victims and information about actions taken by Arla to restore its Middle Eastern business and rebuild good relations with stakeholders as belonging to this cluster. As is the case with instructing information, adjusting information has also been argued to represent an often overlooked aspect of crisis communication in empirical research (Holladay, 2010). By including it in my empirical research, I wish to address this shortcoming and therefore use it as part of my analysis framework for analysing Arla's crisis communication in terms of consistency.

In Arla's blog posts, adjusting information has only been identified as being present in few instances. A case in point being a blog post from January 30, where Honoré explains what

employees in the Middle East are doing to get the organisation's products back in the retail stores and re-establish its good relations with stakeholders:

*“Our employees have slaved away unremittingly to pick up the pieces of our Middle Eastern business through conversations with our customers.”* (Honoré, 2006c, l. 10-11).

Meta-communication about an ad published by Arla in Arab news papers, which informs of the official Danish attitude towards Islam, can also be categorised as adjusting information provided in Arla's communication:

*“We have published ads in the leading seven-eight Saudi news papers, in which the embassy explains Denmark's official respectful attitude to Islam”* (Honoré, 2006c, l. 11-13).

I would argue that the purpose of the publication – besides the obvious: to restore business operations in the Middle East – is to implicitly suggest that Arla in doing everything that lies in its powers to avoid a reoccurrence of similar crisis in the future. Also, in relation to Arla publishing a second ad in Saudi Arabian newspapers on March 19, adjusting information is apparent in both the original blog post commenting on this and its resulting comments/replies following. For example, in the initial post, I was able to identify meta-communication about the ad as well as arguments explaining the rationale supporting its publication:

*“Imagine sitting here at just past 4, being almost ready to lace up the winter boots and stamp homewards, even though we published a full-page advertisement in 25 Arab news papers yesterday in an attempt to initiate a dialogue with the boycotting consumers.”* (Honoré, 2006g, l. 1-3).

When reading the comments responding to this post, it quickly becomes clear that Honoré's sigh of relief was perhaps heaved prematurely. In fact, this post proves to be the most commented of all posts relating to the boycott. The reactions from Danish stakeholders – in particular various women's organisations (Schollert, 2006) and other critics – apparent both within and outside the blog represents a *double-crisis* for Arla. That is, a crisis occurring as a negative reaction to the way, the organisation handles the original crisis. Among the lot of

negative feedback to the ad transpiring as comments to Honoré's blog post is one from a Søren Hansen on March 22:

*“Do you really think that you can speak double-tongued like that? To the Islamists: Islam is a fair and tolerant religion, we sincerely apologise that we employ our freedom of speech in Denmark. To the Danes: That message is merely directed at the Arabs, that's how they talk down there. We believe in freedom of speech.”*  
(Søren Hansen, comment to Honoré, 2006g).

This criticism serves as an exemplar of the many resentful comments given rise to by the Arab ad. Though, in his numerous responses, Honoré maintains the same justification in his answers, as exemplified in the following quote:

*“Henrik and Christian, you both seize on our wording that 40 years of experience in the Middle East has taught us that tolerance and justice make up the foundation of Islam. It is entirely factual that advocates of Islam present it in that way isn't it? We take the liberty of asking the Arab consumers to consider if it is really tolerant and fair to boycott products from a company which has nothing to do with JP's cartoons.”* (Louis Honoré, comment to Honoré, 2006g, March 21, 9:18).

Honoré is thereby providing what can be identified as adjusting information to notify about Arla's actions taken to end the crisis and prevent reoccurrences, and despite his explanations being repeatedly and harshly challenged by critics on the blog, he keeps justifying the ad in a similar way. Furthermore, the explanations he uses to justify the ad and not least its wordings are almost identical to the ones provided in the ad itself. Together this suggests two things: 1) that the blog host is able to defend his argumentation on the blog, thereby making his communication consistent despite being challenged by his readers, and 2) that he is able to make his point consistent with official Arla statements. This testifies that even with the inclusion of an dialogic medium such as a blog, Arla seems able to communicate in a coherent manner within the blog and across different elements in the media landscape – in this case an ad – during the crisis, and it informs the consistency concept by suggesting that reason exists in distinguishing between internal and external consistency of each medium.

Adjusting information can also be identified as being offered on the blog in the aftermath of the crisis. There, Honoré mentions that Arla is sponsoring conferences about co-existence of cultures, thereby suggesting that the organisation takes corrective action in order to avoid a repetition of the crisis (Honoré, 2006h, l. 11-13). While reputation repair strategies are arguably quite backward-looking because the aim of using such is to return to pre-crisis conditions, corrective actions such as Arla's sponsoring of conferences about cultural understanding between nations is quite the opposite. In other words, by suggesting new initiatives made by Arla to become more involved in such issues, Honoré displays that Arla has a willingness to not only return to status quo but to become a better company than prior to the crisis.

As was the case with the blog posts, adjusting information can also be identified in Arla's newsletters, however at a more frequent pace. In the first official response from Arla, the newsletter of January 26, it occurs in a quote of Executive Director, Finn Hansen:

*"We respect all religions and wish to express our sympathy and understanding for those who feel wronged by this incident, says Finn Hansen."* (Arla Foods, 2006a, l. 24-26).

By expressing sympathy for the victims of the crisis through this type of third-person self-reference, Arla is arguably trying to distance itself somewhat from the crisis-triggering events. However, this is done without directly disassociating the organisation from them and without making an official statement about whether the cartoons should have been published or not. Another form of adjusting information apparent in the newsletters serves to inform stakeholders of how Arla is dealing with the crisis. For example, every time Arla plans to publish statements or ads in Middle Eastern media, their content is communicated to Danish stakeholders through newsletters. This is exemplified by the following quote where Arla informs that an ad in which it takes exception to Jyllands-Posten's cartoons will be published in 25 Arab news papers:

*"In the ad, Arla informs of its 40 years' long history in the Middle East and of its background as a co-operative organisation owned by Danish and Swedish farmers."* (Arla Foods, 2006m, l. 6-7).

Besides serving the function of informing stakeholders about Arla's actions taken to return to normal business operations, this information, which is accompanied by a link to a Danish translation of the ad, serves as a projection of the openness and transparency sought by the organisation. However, despite efforts made by Arla's Corporate Communication department to be transparent and consistent in its communication to different stakeholder groups, not every critic reads this newsletter. This becomes apparent when assessing the comments on the blog which criticise Arla for not disclosing information about the ad. One important point is underscored by this, namely that communication is a process where the 'receiver' of an organisation's messages is highly selective, thus an organisation's transparency will be dependent on which messages stakeholders choose to read, interpret and connect to other communication. Therefore, full transparency seems to not only demand an organisation willing to disclose information on all actions and communication efforts taken worldwide but also that stakeholders are willing to invest the time to find and process this information. This suggests that a direct link exists between two concepts, *consistency* and *transparency*, which to my knowledge has not previously been identified by researchers in the field of corporate communication and corporate reputation management.

Finally, after the boycott has decreased in intensity, and Arla's products begin returning to store shelves, I have encountered one instance of Arla using a strategy of offering some kind of compensation to the victims of the crisis. This is illustrated in the following example, where Arla informs of initiatives to give aid to various Middle Eastern groups:

*"[...] 'we plan to adjust certain parts of our marketing' said Finn Hansen. New Arla initiatives include sponsoring humanitarian projects in the region, i.e. giving aid to disabled children, cancer sufferers and the hungry." (Arla Foods, 2006o, 1. 11-14).*

As illustrated above, Arla takes corrective actions in the form of sponsoring humanitarian activities to restore its Middle Eastern business and reputation. While this could arguably be interpreted as a compensation strategy, thus implying some admission of guilt, I propose that it is rather part of a general renewal of Arla entailing the crisis. Also, assuming that the attribution of organisational responsibility is minimal to low, the fact that Arla offers compensation to stakeholders who were hurt by the cartoons will hardly be viewed as an accept of crisis responsibility.

Whereas adjusting information supplied in the blog posts is limited, it is frequently present in Arla's statements in external media – often identifiable in conjunction with instructing information – as was the case with its occurrence in the newsletters. For example, PR Manager Louis Honoré provides instructing information on two attacks on Arla employees in the Middle East while simultaneously informing what Arla is doing what it can to protect its employees thus remedying the human consequences:

*“The effect is that we are extra vigilant when we send out employees to particularly religious areas where the atmosphere can be heated” (In Rasmussen & Grund, 2006, l. 25-26)*

As previously stated, expressing sympathy with victims of a crisis, in this case people who are affronted by the cartoons, is one form of adjusting information, and I have identified several instances of Arla doing this in external media. In one of the initial statements, Finn Hansen explicitly expresses compassion with people hurt (emotionally) by the crisis:

*“For many years, Arla has traded and enjoyed good relations with consumers in the Middle East [...] We respect all religions and wish to express our sympathy and understanding for those who feel wronged by this incident” (In Attrup & Olesen, 2006, l. 22-24).*

The wording in the quote above is taken directly from Arla's newsletter from the preceding day, thereby also suggesting that a company can possibly benefit from paying attention to the effect of its newsletters on news articles, i.e. by using third-person self-referencing. At the peak of the crisis in February, a statement is presented by Arla CEO Peder Tuborgh who informs about the corrective actions taken to end the boycott:

*“We have to support humanitarian activities in the area so the consumers can see that we respect them.” (In Hvilsom, 2006b, l. 34-35)*

The reader might remember that in my discussion of the occurrence of this type of adjusting information in newsletters, such corrective actions could alternatively be interpreted as a compensation strategy. In the article, from which the quote above originates, Arla's CEO is also placing crisis responsibility with external constituencies, namely Middle Eastern

consumers and Denmark. Therefore, if Arla's information about corrective actions is interpreted as a compensation strategy, judged from the SCCT guidelines<sup>12</sup> which argue that deny strategies should not be used in conjunction with rebuild strategies, some inconsistency could be suggested to exist. However, I find it reasonable to argue that in this particular case, the compensation strategy does not imply that Arla accepts responsibility for the crisis but rather should be seen as a way for the organisation to back its promises made to Middle Eastern stakeholders by actions. That is, while I acknowledge other interpretations of Arla's communication, I maintain my interpretation of information about corrective actions as a form of adjusting information. The notification that Arla plans to give aid to humanitarian initiatives is reiterated by regional manager, Jan E. Pedersen in April:

*"[...] we have lived up to the demand of denouncing the Mohammed cartoons. Now we supplement that by offering donations to charity in the area."* (Attrup, 2006c, l. 16-17).

Thereby, the provision of adjusting information in this phase of the crisis is consistent with Tuborgh's statement in February. It is also used similarly in Arla's newsletters from the same time period - that is, as part of a renewal strategy towards increased involvement and dialogue, transparency and globalisation which was already in the pipeline prior to the crisis. If anything, the pace of process was accelerated due to the crisis, thus supporting the claim that renewal can be one outcome of a crisis.

In later phases of the crisis, Arla no longer expresses sympathy with victims in its statements in external media, and only adjusting information about the organisation's actions to restore business operations and rebuild good relations is identified. E.g. Arla is meeting with representatives from the largest retail chains in the region and offering donations in the Middle East as part of a comeback strategy (Attrup, 2006b, l. 2-3; Attrup, 2006c, l. 1-3). One reason for Arla deciding not to explicitly suggest that the company has sympathy with victims in these later phases of the crisis could arguably be that at this point, the organisation's actions and statements have been confronted by Danish stakeholders. In other words, expressing sympathy with Middle Eastern stakeholders has proved to be a risk to Arla's relations with its Danish stakeholders. Another plausible explanation could be that in later

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<sup>12</sup> According to SCCT Guidelines for Crisis Response Strategy Selection 3H, companies in crises should "try to maintain consistency in crisis response by not mixing deny strategies with either diminish or rebuild strategies" (Coombs & Heath, 2006, p. 206) – see appendix 3 for a full overview of the guidelines.



phases of the crisis, Arla's focus has shifted to a more forward-looking strategy where the crisis is downplayed in its communication.

All in all, adjusting information is apparent in communication on each of the three communication platforms. The primary difference between its occurrences on each is that it is more frequently presented in newsletters and external media compared with the blog. In relation to consistency, this is however not enough to suggest that the provision of adjusting information is incoherent across the various channels. Rather, I would argue that this can be contributed to the differing demands of the target groups of each medium as well as to content on newsletters and news articles being assumedly restrained by regulations and directed by journalists' agendas, respectively.

#### 4.4.1.3. Internalising Information

The following part of the analysis will focus on what is known in contemporary crisis communication literature as *crisis response strategies* (Coombs, 1995, 2007 and 2009; Coombs & Heath, 2006; Coombs & Holladay, 2001 and 2002; Holladay, 2010). The difference between this type of information and the previously discussed categories is that the communicative purpose of using internalising information is to protect and/or restore the organisation's reputation. In the following, I will describe and discuss the crisis response strategies identified in Arla's communication and provide examples of each. In keeping with the preceding analysis, I do this in order to investigate the role of Arla's blog in its crisis communication and its effect on the organisation's ability to speak with one voice. Where the strategy in question has resemblance to strategies known from the SCCT it will be clearly stated. However, I find it necessary to emphasise that the theory is used only as a reference in my analysis, not as a checklist.

#### *Placing Responsibility*

Based on my analysis, one communication pattern stands out on Arla's blog, namely a strategy where the host, Louis Honoré, is *placing responsibility* for the crisis with some external party. The purpose of using this strategy is arguably to disassociate Arla from the crisis by pointing out who is factually responsible for the events which triggered it. I have identified this particular communication effort as being used either implicitly or explicitly in most of the blog posts throughout the life-cycle of the crisis. The first post published on January 26 represents a

good example of an explicit appearance of the strategy. In this post, Honoré is categorising the responsible parties in two categories: he points to Jyllands-Posten as being the cause of the super-crisis, because they published the cartoons, but also mentions that, as a response to Jyllands-Posten's action, religious leaders and national media in Saudi Arabia are encouraging consumers to boycott Arla's products:

*"In the recent Friday prayer, several worshippers were encouraged to evade products from Denmark as a protest against Jylland-Posten's cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed".* (Honoré, 2006a, l. 4-6).

Furthermore, it is explicitly stated that it is consumers who are boycotting Arla:

*"The consumers in Saudi Arabia are to an increasing extent boycotting Danish goods, including Arla's, and there is nothing we can do about it".* (Honoré 2006a, l. 2-3).

At other times, a more implicit use of the strategy is recognised. In these cases, Honoré does not reveal who he believes is responsible for the crisis but rather suggests that Arla is definitely not one of *"the involved parties"* and therefore is not to be blamed for it:

*"I hope that the involved parties on both sides realise that the dialogue needs to begin now"* (Honoré, 2006b, l. 12-13).

Generally, the blogger maintains his framing that the boycott is consumer-driven. He also repeatedly refers to religious leaders and Middle Eastern media as playing a part due to their initiating of consumers into the boycott and passing on boycott requests. Furthermore, it is also maintained that the deeper cause of the boycott is Jyllands-Posten's cartoons and the Danish government's handling of the situation. Based on my analysis of Arla's blog, it seems reasonable to conclude that the blog host uses the strategy of pointing out responsible parties consistently in both posts and replies to comments. That is, he uses the strategy throughout the crisis and his framing is coherent as so far as whom he suggests bear the responsibility for both the sub-crisis and the super-crisis.

The same suggestion of external bearers of responsibility for the crisis can be recognised in Arla's newsletters. Here, the strategy has primarily been identified in the initial phases of the crisis from the framing provided in the first couple of newsletters to the newsletter of January 31 from which the following excerpt originates:

*“We're now waiting to see how the parties involved can resolve the situation. Arla will make all resources available in order to create a dialogue which can contribute to resolving this destructive conflict between Denmark and the Arab world”, Peder Tuborgh says.”* (Arla Foods, 2006g, l. 4-6).

Even though Arla, judged from the statement above, apparently does not see itself as being a party in the larger conflict, the excerpt shows that the organisation has a need of acting to solve the crisis – obviously because it is severely affected by it – and therefore it offers its help. But in doing so, Arla both implicitly and explicitly suggests who are to blame for the crisis. Firstly, it is implicitly suggested in the newsletter that Arla is not a part of the “involved parties” in the crisis which is framed as a conflict between Denmark and the Arab world. In a sentence occurring later in the same newsletter, it becomes more apparent who the involved parties are:

*“Arla is neither a newspaper nor a political party and we don't wish to take part in a political debate. Equally, we're not responsible for solving the conflict, but we would like to contribute to a dialogue between the parties and urge them to find a solution”* (Arla Foods, 2006g, l. 13-15).

It is hardly a coincidence that Tuborgh refers to a “*newspaper*” and a “*political party*”, and I interpret this as a reference to Jyllands-Posten and the Danish government. My interpretation of “*political party*” as pointing to the Danish government led by Anders Fogh Rasmussen is supported by a statement from a newsletter of February 4, where it is suggested that the Prime Minister's interview on Arab TV has resulted in an intensification of the boycott (Arla Foods, 2006i, l. 9-10). Alternatively, this can be interpreted as Arla simply stating that it is merely a dairy company and that its duties as such exclude a responsibility to solve complex political disagreements between Denmark and Middle Eastern nations.

While the strategy is primarily used to apportion blame for the super-crisis in newsletters, comments are also made concerning the boycott. Initially, it is explicitly stated that Saudi

media and religious leaders have initiated the boycott which is effectuated by Arla's customers (Arla Foods, 2006a). Similarly, on January 29, retail customers are held responsible for removing Arla's products from the reach of consumers:

*"All Arla's customers in the region have cancelled their orders and sales have come to a standstill in almost all markets"* (Arla Foods, 2006c, l. 2-3).

That Arla places responsibility for the boycott partly with its retail customers is somewhat contradictory to the framing on the blog where it is maintained that the boycott is consumer-driven. However, from February 16 (Arla Foods, 2006j) and onwards, customers are suggested to act only on consumer pressure. Thereby, there is a change in strategy and Arla's Middle Eastern consumers are now pointed out as bearing responsibility for the boycott as clearly suggested in the following quote:

*"Since late January, Arab consumers have totally boycotted products from Arla in protest against the Mohammed cartoons."* (Arla Foods, 2006m, l. 2-4).

Thereby, the strategy's use in newsletters is brought into line with that on the blog. Besides the incongruity related to whether consumers or customers are initially apportioned blame for the boycott, another small difference between the two media relates to the duration of the strategy's use. In newsletters it is largely discontinued from February 4 whereas on the blog it is apparent through the crisis. Besides these minor differences, the strategy's appearance in newsletters generally conforms to the patterns on the blog.

I have also identified quite commonly the strategy of freeing Arla from crisis responsibility by blaming other parties in statements in external media. From the initial statement appearing in newspapers on January 26 till February 20, the strategy is identified in use in more or less every article. Thereafter, it no longer appears in Arla's communication in external media. This pattern is quite similar to Arla's communication in newsletters but deviate from patterns on the blog. Initially, Arla's statement in external media points implicitly to Saudi Arabian religious leaders, media, customers, and consumers as sharing the responsibility for the boycott – either because they have initiated it, spread the message, removed Arla's products from stores, or merely acted on the message by not buying the products (Attrup & Pedersen, 2006). However, in a subsequent statement made to the press, it seems that Arla wishes to

free its Middle Eastern customers from responsibility. This is exemplified in the following quote of Astrid Gade Nielsen informing about yellow tape being attached to Arla's products as a warning of their Danish origin:

*"We do not know who puts up the yellow tape, but it is stuck around some of the products, on the packaging or the shelves"* (Hvilsom et al, 2006, l. 7-11).

Thereby, Arla refrains from suggesting that the store owners are involved in this. Instead, Middle Eastern consumers are the only group of constituencies explicitly suggested to bear the responsibility for the boycott in the remainder of the articles. For example, Louis Honoré is quoted for making the following statement:

*"It is our impression that the stores, which are our customers, are being pressured by the consumers. It is not the retail trade which heads or directs this. They merely react on consumer enquiries."* (Hvilsom & el-Gourfti, 2006, l. 10-11).

Later, the framing of boycott as being consumer-driven is reiterated by Arla CEO, Peder Tuborgh as quoted in an article of February 19:

*"The Arla employees in the Middle East concurrently report that it is the individual families in the cities that have decided not to buy Danish products"* ("Hvilsom, 2006b, l. 5-7).

This pattern has clear resemblance with the change in strategy identified in newsletters where Arla also shifted from placing responsibility for the boycott with customers to instead hold consumers responsible for the boycott. Relating to the larger conflict, it is primarily Jyllands-Posten and the Danish government that are apportioned blame, just as on the other platforms:

*"Our customers want us to take exception to the cartoons and put pressure on Jyllands-Posten and the political system of Denmark."* (Executive Director, Finn Hansen, quoted in Attrup, 2006a, l. 26-27).

As apparent from this quote, there seems to be some reluctance to explicitly suggest that Jyllands-Posten and the Danish government are responsible for the crisis. This pattern is

similar to communication in newsletters where this claim is also made rather implicitly. Instead a reference is made to others (customers) suggesting this. There is thus coherence between how the strategy is used here and Arla's general refusal to take a stance on the cartoons in its initial communication about the crisis (see for example Attrup & Olesen, 2006). But as the crisis intensifies there is a move in strategy towards Arla more explicitly pointing out Jyllands-Posten's cartoons as the primary cause of the conflict:

*"Our ethical policy states that we in Arla can not affront others based on their religion or ethnic origin. Therefore, we of course take exception to Jyllands-Posten's cartoons"* (Peder Tuborgh quoted in Hvilsom, 2006c, l. 3-4).

The above quotes appear clearly as examples of a strategy in use in Arla's external communication where the organisation tries to evade crisis responsibility by suggesting who should really be blamed for it. A similar strategy can be found in Coombs' SCCT. Here it is known as a *scapegoat strategy*, belonging to a cluster of *deny* strategies. The similarity between the scapegoat strategy and the strategy *placing responsibility* identified in my analysis points to my findings having a wider relevancy in crisis communication research as well as substantiating my coding of examined documents.

My analysis of this particular strategy displays that it is employed quite consistently within the blog as well as across the various crisis communication platforms in play. Slight differences exist in terms of whether focus is on pointing out who are responsible for the super-crisis and/or for the sub-crisis. E.g. on the blog and in external media, both layers of the crisis is assessed, whereas newsletters are used primarily to address the super-crisis. The blog and external media furthermore share the characteristic that the issues are assessed both implicitly and explicitly, where the strategy of pointing out bearers of blame in newsletters is mostly delivered explicitly. However, in terms of duration, newsletters and external media have more common features. More specifically, the strategy is identifiable in use on the blog throughout the crisis lifecycle, but in newsletters and external media it disappears from Arla's communication in later phases of the crisis. While not necessarily having any significance, this could be interpreted as some kind of incoherence between what is communicated on the blog and through more traditional channels. However, whether it negatively affects the overall consistency of Arla's communication is debateable. But it does somewhat illustrate the rather incontrollable nature of the blog medium.

### *Casualty*

The strategy of placing responsibility described above is frequently used on the blog in combination with other strategies. For example, on the blog, Honoré often represents Arla as a *casualty* of the crisis, arguably in order to evade Arla of crisis responsibility. I find it reasonable to argue that this strategy, when used in conjunction with *placing responsibility*, helps strengthen the original message by illustrating Arla's hostage-like role in the crisis. A post from February 22 illustrates this point:

*"Today the Arab consumer does not distinguish much between Arla, Jyllands-Posten and the Danish government. In their eyes, all Danes are to blame for the publication of the cartoons of their Prophet. And since Arla is the most visible Danish symbol in the Middle East [...] the resentment is directed at Arla."* (Honoré, 2006f, l. 5-9).

In this post, Honoré suggests that the Arab consumers take Arla hostage only because the organisation's products represent a significant symbol of Denmark in the Middle East. Simultaneously, it is explicitly stated that Jyllands-Posten and the Danish government are the real bearers of responsibility for the crisis. In a post published in December, Honoré reiterates that Arla has suffered dearly - and still is suffering - from the consequences of the crisis:

*"[...] the Mohammed-Crisis has set our Middle Eastern business back two years. It is fair to state that the boycott as such has ended. However, we are still suffering from the reverberations of it".* (Honoré, 2006h, l. 9-12).

Again, the casualty strategy is identified on the blog as being delivering simultaneously with a pointing to actors who are to be blamed for Arla's suffering. Thus, no communication efforts used on the blog imply inconsistency in how the strategy appears on this particular crisis communication platform. Not only does Honoré at no point accept any responsibility for the crisis on behalf of Arla, the strategy is furthermore used only in conjunction with the placing responsibility strategy. I thus find it reasonable to conclude that the strategy is used consistently within the blog medium.

In newsletters, the strategy is likewise exclusively apparent in conjunction with Arla placing responsibility for the crisis, thereby being appropriately used only in connection with a primary crisis response strategy, reinforcing it as intended:

*“We receive many signals that this boycott is not in any way directed at Arla and alone is targeted at Denmark and Jyllands-Posten.”* (Arla Foods, 2006d, l. 6-7).

This excerpt exemplifies how Arla presents itself as a casualty of the crisis (the boycott is not directed at Arla) to reinforce the strategy of placing responsibility (the boycott is targeted at Denmark and Jyllands-Posten, implied that they are to blame for it). The strategy is then not visible in Arla’s communication until March 18 when Arla announces that it will publish an ad informing Middle Eastern stakeholders about the organisation’s position on the cartoons and offering them Arla’s version of the crisis-framing:

*“Since late January, Arab consumers have carried out a 100% effective boycott of Arla products as a protest against the Mohammed cartoons.”* (Arla Foods, 2006m, l. 2-4).

Again, the use of the casualty strategy is delivered in conjunction with the blame strategy. More precisely, it is explicitly stated that Arab consumers are responsible for the boycott while the deeper cause of it is to be found in the 12 cartoons, thereby it is simultaneously implied that Arla is as an underserved victim. Based on the above analysis, the use of the strategy is arguably highly similar to patterns identified on the blog.

Communication presenting Arla as suffering from events over which they had no control appears in statements in external media as well. In some instances, it occurs as a suggestion that the boycott is directed at Danish products in general; hence implying that Arla is just another casualty of the crisis. This is exemplified in the following quote of Louis Honoré:

*“Our customers generally say the same thing. Namely, that they have nothing against us as a company but they have an issue with our goods because they are Danish.”* (N.N./Ritzau, 2006a, l. 32-33).



The above quote not only appears as a clear example of the casualty strategy, it also serves to illustrate how it is often used alongside the strategy of placing responsibility with external parties and that it is quite similar to communication patterns on the other platforms. At other times, the projection of Arla as a casualty is highly explicit, as apparent from the following example where Astrid Gade Nielsen provides her answer to why Arla does not apologise on behalf of Denmark:

*“I don’t think that is what the conflict revolves around. We live by selling dairy products and that is all we need to deal with. We have as exporters become a pawn in the game and we can only hope for the parties to get together”* (Hvilsom et al, 2006, l. 47-49).

By referring to Arla as “*a pawn in the game*” it is clear that Arla accepts no responsibility for the crisis, and the reference made to “*the parties*” is, similarly to previously discussed references to “*the involved parties*”, interpreted as Arla implicitly pointing to other parties to be blamed. Generally and similarly to its use on the other elements of Arla’s crisis communication platform, the casualty strategy always appears in external media simultaneously with Arla placing crisis responsibility. This also explains why it disappears from Arla’s statements around February 20 when the use of the scapegoat strategy is also more or less discontinued.

There are clear signs of equality between this strategy and a reinforcing strategy in Coombs’ theory called *victimage*. Thus, once again, the coincidence between a strategy identified and thoroughly tested experimentally by Coombs’ and others and my identified *casualty* strategy supports my finding and exemplifies the broader relevance of my research. Using insights from the SCCT, the communicative purpose of the strategy would then be to reinforce primary crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2007). As suggested in the above analysis, the casualty strategy is exclusively used together with the blame strategy on each platform, thereby suggesting consistency both within the blog and across the different types of media.

### *Ingratiation*

The *casualty* strategy illustrated in application in the previous part of my analysis is also used on the blog in combination with a strategy of *seeking sympathy* with stakeholders through *ingratiation*. Similarly to the projecting Arla as a victim, this strategy is arguably intended to

support a primary response strategy. For example, Honoré proposes that Arla has worked hard for many years to earn its strong position in the Middle East:

*“What Arla has spent 40 years building up has been ruined in 5 days.”* (Honoré, 2006b, 1. 9-10).

As the blog is assumedly targeted towards Danish stakeholders, I interpret Honoré’s mentioning of 40 years of hard work in the Middle East as a reminder to these that the Arla has secured Danish workplaces (because products for the Middle East is produced primarily in Denmark). Thus, his suggestion serves the communicative purpose of gaining sympathy for Arla by suggesting some sort of relation between the organisation and its stakeholders. Furthermore, the wording *“has been ruined”* implies that someone else is doing this to Arla – or in other words, Arla too is a victim of the crisis. Another example is found in Honoré’s reply to the many harsh comments following the publication of the quite accommodative ad from March 19:

*“[...] our 40 years of conducting business in the Middle East has “taught us that justice and tolerance are fundamental values of Islam“ [...]. When our distributors visit retail store, they are treated just and tolerantly [...] Neither have we neglected to notice that the two values form the foundation of Islam.”* (reply to Honoré, 2006g – March 23, 16:04).

Honoré’s argumentation for the appropriateness of the ad and not least its wording includes a praising of Arla’s Middle Eastern stakeholders in the form of Honoré honouring the fundamental values of their religion. Surprisingly, despite being presented daily with resentful remarks from participants on his blog, Honoré manages to maintain consistency in his communication by reasoning in keeping with arguments presented in previous posts.

Arla’s newsletters also carry communication which I categorise as belonging to a strategy of seeking sympathy through ingratiation. It is identifiable from the initial publication presented below until March 22 when it is last apparent in this medium:

*“For many years, Arla has traded, and enjoyed good relations with consumers in the Middle East. In fact, we have more Muslim than Danish consumers.”* (Arla Foods, 2006a, l. 20-21).

The focus on the good relations existing between Arla and its Middle Eastern consumers and the mentioning that these constitute a majority when compared to their Danish counterparts appears to be a praising of this group, thus illustrating how the statement can be interpreted as an ingratiation strategy. Another example is evident in meta-communication about the content of the ad published in Saudi Arabia in March:

*“The advertisement also sets out how, after 40 years in the Middle East, Arla Foods is well aware that justice and tolerance are basic Islamic values.”* (Arla Foods, 2006m, l. 10-11).

I would argue that the reference to Arla’s 40 year history in the Middle East serves as a reminder of past good deeds, while Arla showing understanding of Islamic values and describing these in highly positive words can arguably be interpreted as a way to praise Middle Eastern consumers.

This strategy can also be identified in statements made by Arla spokespersons in external media. The following quote, which is taken from an article in which blame for the crisis is also presented, serves as an example:

*“[...] in few days, we have lost customer relations which have taken decades to build. Our relation to customers and consumers is what I consider our most valuable asset.”* (Peder Tuborgh cited in Hvilsom, 2006a, l. 25-27).

The strategy is apparent by Tuborgh’s reference to Arla’s customers and consumers as its most valuable asset. It is thereby implied that Arla is willing to go to the greatest possible length to protect that asset and arguably, Tuborgh tries to support the claim that Arla is not to be blamed for a crisis that threatens it. Simultaneously, it is mentioned that it has taken many years to build these relations, which can be interpreted as a pointing to Arla’s past feats. The reference to good deeds is apparent in numerous incidences of Arla spokespersons being cited in external media, as exemplified in the following:

*“For 40 years, we have worked hard to build brands in the Middle East to secure the members of our co-operative society steady earnings. Therefore, we have an exhaustive knowledge about the market and will not throw up the game so easily”.*

(CEO, Peder Tuborgh cited in Svaneborg, 2006, l. 19-21).

Apart from seeking sympathy from stakeholders by suggesting that Arla’s presence in the Middle East secures Danish and Swedish farmers a steady income, the strategy as exemplified above also serves to legitimise Arla’s current communication in the Middle East by making a connection between the duration of Arla’s presence in the Middle East and a broad knowledge about the culture.

The *ingratiation* strategy presented above is also part of the SCCT, where it represents a reinforcing strategy, thereby substantiating my coding of Arla’s communication efforts. It also supports my notion that the strategy should be used only in combination with a primary strategy in order to support it. This is also the case here as apparent from the above analysis. Furthermore, as suggested, it finds use on all three communication platforms. Slight differences exist in terms of whether the focus is on projecting Arla as a good company or on directly praising stakeholders but generally, consistency exist in the uses of the strategy on the blog and across the various media.

While the strategies presented and discussed so far all have strong similarities to types of internalising information described in the SCCT, my analysis identifies tactics in Arla’s communication not supported by current crisis communication theories. I have nonetheless included them in my analysis due to their potential to reveal how the blog differs from other channels in terms of how claims are presented and supported. Furthermore, they are so profound in Arla’s communication that they arguably deserve their own categories.

### *Dissociation*

I have identified a frequently appearing pattern on the blog where the blogger’s objective seems to be to reduce organisational responsibility for the crisis by explicitly distancing Arla from the cause of it. For example, on February 5, Honoré is changing his view that there is nothing Arla can or should do about the boycott. In his post from that day, he is voicing his

*personal belief* that it is time that Arla explicitly dissociates itself from the cartoons and other factors which have intensified the crisis:

*“I have a good mind to Arla showing the Arab consumers that we have nothing to do with either the cartoons in Jyllands-Posten, nor the Prime Minister’s refusal to meet the Arab ambassadors or even alleged plans to burn the Koran [...]”* (Honoré, 2006d, l. 11-14).

As stated, this is an example of the blog host presenting his own opinion of the crisis. In subsequent posts, the *dissociation* strategy becomes more apparent and less affixed to a personal evaluation of the crisis:

*“But I have also said that Arla, taking its ethical policy as a starting point, necessarily has to dissociate itself from these cartoons, which has proved to affront hundreds of millions of Muslims”* (Honoré, 2006e, l. 9-11).

While Coombs suggests different strategies which are supposed to minimise organisational responsibility for a crisis, the SCCT does not offer support for a strategy of direct dissociation from actions that lead to a crisis and/or the key players performing these actions. However, in this particular case, where religious convictions were involved, the strategy seems to be warranted. This assessment is not to be confused with disregard concerning the double-crisis caused by the strategy’s appearance in Arla’s communication. But in hindsight, it was apparently the utilisation of this distinct strategy that made for a termination of the boycott of Arla’s brands (Hansen & Hundevadt, 2006, p. 223). It has even been suggested that the severe criticism Arla subsequently was subject to in Denmark, i.e. the double-crisis, helped ending the boycott (Ibid.). Additionally, the strategy has subsequently found use whenever trouble is brewing relating to religious issues. For example, when right wing youth political party, DFU, in the autumn of 2006 published a video recording of their members ridiculing the Prophet Mohammed in new cartoons, politicians and organisations alike – Arla included – swiftly dissociated themselves from these actions to prevent a fresh outbreak of the Cartoon Crisis (see for example Lohse & Steensbeck, 2006).

I have also identified the dissociation strategy in Arla’s newsletters. As was the case on the blog, Arla expresses a regret of the consequences of the crisis in initial responses but refrains

from making a direct dissociation of Arla from the crisis-triggering events. Likewise, no statements are made about whether or not the cartoons should have ever been published. However, on February 16, the first dissociation statement occurs in a newsletter informing about Arla's presence at a food fair in Dubai:

*“During the exhibition, posters at Arla’s stand will distance Arla from the Mohammed cartoons and copies of Jyllands-Posten’s apology will be distributed to customers.”* (Arla Foods, 2006j, l. 12-15).

A change in the communicative strategy can thus be identified, where Arla becomes more proactive and makes a clear statement about the cartoons. I contribute this change to a realisation that in order to get the boycott lifted, the organisation needs to explicitly take a stance on the now infamous cartoons. While such change could be suggested to indicate inconsistency, using insights from the SCCT guidelines<sup>13</sup>, which suggests that an organisation *“be prepared to change crisis response strategies if the crisis situation mutates and demands a different response to effectively protect the organisation’s reputation”* (Coombs & Heath, 2006, p. 206), I rather interpret this as Arla adjusting its communication according to the crisis’ progression. Similarly, in a newsletter of March 18, Arla’s dissociation is conveyed:

*“[the ad] also reiterates Arla’s dissociation from the cartoons, which was explained to Arab business connections at last month’s Gulfood exhibition in Dubai”* (Arla Foods, 2006m, l. 7-9).

Thereby, the dissociation strategy appears quite explicitly and this pattern is directly comparable with its appearance on the blog. By communicating about the ad in newsletters, Arla possibly seeks to guide the understanding in a certain direction and anticipate likely negative reactions from Danish consumers. The strategy is lastly evident in a newsletter of March 22 in which Arla addresses consumer criticism in Denmark which remained a pervasive issue. Here, Executive Director, Finn Hansen, addresses Arla’s critics and the following quote is his answer to a question, asking if Arla has sympathy for people burning flags and embassies:

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<sup>13</sup> For a review of the SCCT guidelines, see appendix 3.

*“No, we vigorous take exception to that. What we understand is that in frustration you resort to peaceful means such as a boycott to express your attitude”* (Arla Foods, 2006n, l. 13-14).

This newsletter illustrates that Arla not only takes exception to the cartoons but also to the violent actions of resentful consumers in the Middle East. This is the first and only time Arla attacks these stakeholders for their actions in its newsletters. An explanation for this can be that Arla is now (in March) focusing exclusively on ending the boycott and therefore does not want to upset its Middle Eastern stakeholders by commenting further on their actions. This interpretation would also explain why this particular newsletter is only available in Danish, whereas most others are also at disposal in English. While perhaps a sound decision in this case, it is hardly in accordance with Arla’s general open-window strategy to keep parts of its communication unavailable to some stakeholders – i.e. those who do not understand Danish – no matter the reason for doing so.

When it comes to taking a stance on the cartoons in external media, Arla’s communication seems to follow a similar pattern. Initially, no comments are made regarding Jyllands-Posten and the cartoons, but in mid February a change in strategy can be identified where Arla explicitly announces its attitude towards the cartoons:

*“Our ethical policy states that we in Arla can not affront others based on their religion or ethnic origin. Therefore, we of course take exception to Jyllands-Posten’s cartoons.”* (Tuborgh cited in, Hvilsom, 2006c, l. 3-5).

Again, I find it reasonable to propose that the move from not being willing to comment on the cartoons to directly dissociating Arla from them can be attributed to the progression of the crisis. The dissociation statement is reiterated by spokespersons in external media on several occasions, including in connection with the Arab ad campaign, the content of which is quoted in several newspapers (see for example N.N./Ritzau, 2006b). After March 20, the strategy largely disappears as part in Arla’s communication. This can be attributed to the boycott of the organisation’s products (as the only Danish products) having been terminated, supposedly as a result of its official disassociation from the cartoons. It is however possible to identify one additional instance of its occurrence in Arla’s communication. That is, in October 2006,

as a response to DFU's publication of new cartoons, Arla immediately takes exception to these:

*"We have been in close contact with business partners and contacts. They have asked us to officially take exception to the cartoons like the Danish Prime Minister has done. Now, we have done that and there is no new message"* (Finn Hansen cited in Olesen, 2006b, l. 13-14),

At this point, in the aftermath of the original crisis, these new cartoons carry the risk of renewing of it. Therefore, having assumedly learned from the situation in spring, Arla explicitly dissociates the organisation from DFU's actions. However, this time the message is delivered in combination with a *reference* to the Danish Prime Minister who has made a similar statement. I find it reasonable to argue that this serves the purpose of legitimising Arla's communication, thereby avoiding the risk of a new double-crisis. The strategy of using referencing to an external authority to legitimise Arla's own communication will be addressed in a subsequent part of my analysis.

Interestingly, while overall consistency exists in communication efforts identified as the dissociation strategy both within the blog and across the three communication platforms, one instance of its occurrence on the blog seems worth noticing. Namely, when Honoré first airs that he has a good mind to explicitly disassociate Arla from the cartoons on February 5. This blog post was published 11 days prior to Arla officially taking exception to the cartoons in a newsletter. Thereby, it seems that the blog host's statement is out of line with Arla's communication in more official media and could therefore imply inconsistency in the use of the dissociation strategy. However, it should also be considered that Honoré in that particular post emphasises that he speaks for himself only. In line with statements made by Sanne Vinther, which has been presented in my analysis of the internal dimension of management of consistency in Arla, I would argue that this type of inconsistency is not ruinous to the overall impression of Arla's communication. Rather, it might even add to the trustworthiness of the blogger because it displays that on the blog, Honoré speaks as an individual person, not as a corporate spokesperson. Among practitioners it seems to be widely agreed that freeing blogs of 'corporate speak' is a prerequisite for their success and this argument can thus be used to validate this minor incidence of inconsistency in the use of the dissociation strategy across the three channels.



### *Referencing External Authority*

My analysis identifies several instances where Honoré as a blog host seeks legitimacy for his arguments by *referencing external authorities*. The following blog post extract serves as an example of this:

*“But I have also said that Arla, taking its ethical policy as a starting point, necessarily has to take exception to these cartoons, which has proved to affront hundreds of millions of Muslims. That is, more or less the same message as that of Anders Fogh Rasmussen, Kofi Annan and the Pope without anyone accusing them of having sold out freedom of speech.”* (Honoré, 2006e, l. 9-11).

As is the case in the excerpt above, this strategy is primarily used to fend off attacks on Arla’s communication and/or behaviour, in this case for being “non-Danish” or for “selling out freedom of speech” in their ad targeted at Middle Eastern consumers. It is therefore suggested to be a support strategy serving to strengthen the claims related to other strategies.

Where the strategy has been identified in almost half of all blog posts, it can be found only once in Arla’s newsletters, namely on January 27. Here Arla quite explicitly references the Danish Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Hans Klingenberg:

*“In the press release, published on the Danish Embassy’s website, Denmark’s Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Hans Klingenberg, reiterates that Denmark respects all religions.”* (Arla Foods, 2006b, l. 5-7).

While perhaps not apparent how this supports Arla’s communication efforts and thereby secures organisational legitimacy, a look at Arla’s newsletter of January 26 addressing the crisis sheds some light. In that newsletter, it is stated in a quote of Executive Director, Finn Hansen, that “*we [Arla] respect all religions*” (Arla Foods, 2006a, l. 21-23). Thereby, it becomes evident that the quote of Klingenberg serves to justify statements made by Arla in the first newsletter. Just like Honoré does in his blog post, referencing external authorities are being used to support Arla’s own framing of the crisis and its communication. However, whereas this type of strategy in the blog is used with some humour and added personal opinions this is not the case in newsletters, where the language is formal and where it is not common in Arla’s case to express personal opinions. Furthermore, as only one instance of the

strategy can be identified in newsletters, it appears that this strategy is not an appropriate reinforcing strategy to be used on this platform. Instead, the newsletters are characterised by containing a lot of *third-person self-referencing* with quotes of members of Arla's management in more or less every newsletter as exemplified in the following:

*“”The dialogue here has taken a positive turn, and we hope that the Prime Minister and Jyllands-Posten's recent statements combined with the positive reactions from Danish-Muslim organisations will have an impact in the Middle East,” says Executive Director Finn Hansen.”* (Arla Foods, 2006e, l. 7-9).

I do not wish to present this as a crisis response strategy as such and rather propose that it is a common characteristic of the genre, serving to make the content of newsletters easily transferred to news articles. While it is primarily Executive Director, Finn Hansen, who is quoted in the newsletters, third-person self-referencing in the form of quotes of Arla CEO, Peder Tuborgh, and Chairman of the Board of Directors, Knud Erik Nielsen, are also included alongside quotes of Corporate Communication Manager, Astrid Gade Nielsen, CEO of Arla Division Production, Jens Refslund, Vice CEO, Andreas Lundby, and Public Relations Manager, Louis Honoré. The fact that these persons all hold high positions in Arla implies that the organisation is highly keen on ending the crisis. The third-person self-referencing thereby helps highlight the severity of the crisis and thus serve to put pressure on the involved parties to resolve it.

The limited appearance in newsletters of the strategy of referencing external authorities to support claims made by Arla is quite similar to its occurrences in external media where it is identified in just two articles. The quote of Tuborgh in an article from Jyllands-Posten presented below illustrates this support strategy in use in connection with Arla officially disassociating the company from the cartoons:

*”But that can not be controversial. The Prime Minister and UN's Secretary General have made the same personal assessments. Jyllands-Posten has also expressed itself that the newspaper has never wanted to affront anyone. Therefore, it is fair and reasonable that we now voice our position on the cartoons.”* (Olesen, 2006a, l. 20-24).

Arla's CEO is thus emphasising that Arla's official position on the cartoons is similar to that of various authorities. This arguably helps legitimising the use of a dissociation strategy and makes Arla's communication efforts less likely to be challenged by stakeholders. Another example can be found in communication from the crisis' aftermath in connection with the new cartoons of Mohammed made by DFU and Arla's dissociation from these. In this situation, it is once again the Danish Prime Minister who is referenced to claim legitimacy for Arla's communication:

*"They have asked us to officially take exception to the cartoons like the Danish Prime Minister has done. Now, we have done that and there is no new message."*  
(Finn Hansen cited in Olesen, 2006b, l. 13-15).

While there is definitely consistency in the way the strategy of making reference to external authorities to reinforce other strategies within the blog, it has only limited appearances in newsletters and in external media. However, since I argue that it is a secondary strategy, this arguably does not distort the consistency of Arla's overall crisis communication. It does however imply that this particular reinforcing strategy is most suitable for the blog platform. An argument which supports this claim is that the blog medium qua it serving as a mouthpiece for an individual Arla employee gives leeway for personal and rather rash expressions, whereas newsletters and official statements in external media require more formal and considered communication. For example, in Denmark it seems to be generally understood that companies do not meddle in political or religious issues which do not concern them. Thus, an organisation such as Arla needs to carefully consider which external authorities to reference in official statements in order to comply with such norms.

#### **4.4.2. Concluding Remarks on Arla's Crisis Communication**

As stated in my introduction to this part of the analysis, the purpose of looking at Arla's communication in terms of crisis response strategies was to investigate the role of the blog in Arla's communication with a particular focus on how consistency unfolds in practise within and across various media platforms during a crisis. My analysis identified and assessed the occurrence of instructing information, adjusting information and internalising information, including the following strategies: *placing responsibility*, *casualty*, *ingratiation*, *dissociation*, and *referencing external authorities*. While some slight nuances exist in the use of the various

crisis response strategies and support strategies on the three communication platforms, the overall impression of Arla's crisis communication during the crisis is that it was highly consistent. When changes in strategy occur, these are apparent in communication on every platform and I therefore attribute these to strategic alterations following the crisis' mutation.

In my analysis, I argued that the three first abovementioned strategies were quite similar to strategies presented in Coombs' SCCT, where they represent the deny strategy *scapegoat* and the two types of reinforcing strategies *ingratiation* and *victimimage*, respectively. The remainder of the strategies which I identified in Arla's communication thus represents new aspects which in the hindsight of the Cartoon Crisis can be added to the theory's response strategies. As I suggested in my analysis, the *dissociation* strategy involve taking direct exception to the crisis-triggering events – an action which at the time caused some difficulties for Arla because it triggered a double-crisis. However, I also suggested that its use by Arla in the aftermath of the crisis where new cartoons were made public was quite unproblematic. Therefore, I find it reasonable to argue that the strategy deserves a place as an independent strategy to be used in cases where the attribution of organisational crisis responsibility is minimal to low but the organisation is nonetheless involved in the crisis, e.g. as a hostage. A new support strategy, *referencing to external authorities*, was also identified in my analysis. Similar to Coombs' reinforcing strategies, the new strategy serves the purpose of strengthening the crisis response strategy it is used in conjunction with. However, while Coombs' does not consider the fit between individual reinforcing strategies and different communication platforms, my analysis shows that with this new strategy it is reasonable to do so. The strategy, which serves its reinforcing purpose by creating legitimacy for the organisation's claims, was particularly profound on the blog whereas it was rarely identified on the other platforms and thus seemingly most appropriate for use on the blog. I would therefore argue that this reinforcing strategy is an exemplar of a strategy that is distinctly useful on blogs, thereby supporting the idea that organisations can benefit from adding this platform to its crisis communication.

## 5. Conclusion

The problem statement guiding this thesis focused on establishing the features of the consistency concept in organisational communication through an examination of actual crisis communication and based on this, make suggestions related to how organisations can communicate consistently in crises when blogs are adding to their media mix. I have sought to answer this problem statement based on a case study of Arla and the Cartoon Crisis of 2006.

Informing the problem statement, three main conclusions can be drawn from my research. The first addresses the consistency concept. As suggested by the literature review, consistency in communication ought to be the goal of any organisation. However, my research suggests that while Arla's corporate communication department acknowledges this proposition as an overall goal, it is also implied in the analysis that the inclusion of the blog medium in the general communication landscape of the organisation has somewhat altered this understanding. I illustrated that integration of all communication, and thereby securing of consistency, is aided through both horizontal and vertical structures in Arla. Additionally, it was argued that generally, Arla adheres to the current ideals of transparency and a dialogic approach to communication. Thus, this case proved highly appropriate to investigate the tensions between the two ideals. Surprisingly, my analysis shows that rather than trying to control what is communicated on the blog, this particular communication platform is allowed a very high degree of freedom in Arla. Nonetheless, the communication on this platform proved both internally and externally consistent. This finding allows me to question the theoretical proposition that an organisation is unable to communicate consistently if using new media platforms such as blogs. I acknowledge that slight differences exist in the appearance of various strategies on the blog compared with the other two media platforms examined, but I also find it fair to argue that these are not significant enough to conclude that communication on a blog cannot be coherent with communication through other channels. But how then is it possible to explain the consistency in Arla's communication during this crisis? On the one hand, communication in Arla is highly centralised, coordinated and controlled by the corporate communication department. On the other, the blog is somewhat freed from these restraints and functions within widely defined conditions. As such, consistency in Arla's crisis communication can be attributed to the organisation having found a way to be ambidextrous – that is, the organisation is able to balance the need for control (consistency) with the demand for flexibility (dialogue). I of course acknowledge that it

increases the probability of consistency that the blog host in this case is part of the general crisis communication team.

The second main conclusion addresses transparency. As previously argued, based on my assessment of a rather substantial portion of Arla's communication relating to the crisis, no significant inconsistency could be identified despite the organisation's inclusion of a blog in its complex media landscape. However, on several occasions, participants on the blog and other stakeholders voiced their assessment of Arla's communication being inconsistent in terms of what was being communicated in Denmark and in the Middle East. I also suggested that even though Arla actually disclosed information on all communication efforts to its Danish stakeholders, there was still a prevailing conception among Danish critics that this was not the case. Based on this, I find it reasonable to conclude that a direct link exists between the two concepts *transparency* and *consistency*, making them highly interdependent. If an organisation is in fact consistent in terms of what is communicated to external stakeholders but this communication is not available to all of these, chances are that the organisation will likely be accused of speaking two-tongued and hence inconsistently. Alternatively, if the same organisation makes available all information, hence is fully transparent, in its external appearance but does this without giving thought to how its information is presented in terms of consistency, the result will likely be as disastrous. That is, as illustrated by this extreme case, it seems that neither consistency nor transparency can be achieved without the presence of the other. In a similar line of thought, a second conclusion to be drawn from this is that transparency, a state which arguably affects the perceived consistency of an organisation's communication, can only be achieved if it is sought by both the organisation and its stakeholders. That is, an organisation can make available all sort of information to its stakeholders, but it is not until these choose to assess and process it in forming their general opinion about the organisation that the organisation will be perceived as being transparent and its communication consistent. While thereby supporting the criticism of the transparency thesis of corporate communication presented by Christensen et al (2008), this is not to say that being perceived as transparent and as speaking with one voice is an unachievable quest for organisations. For example, in Arla's case, the organisation should perhaps consider the presentation of its information on different media platforms and how they are intermittently linked. During this crisis, newsletters and blogs posts were published in different areas of its website. Newsletters were accessible through a news archive whereas stakeholders needed to go to Arla Forum, which represents sort of a sub-site, to access Arla's blogs. Therefore, the

possibility of stakeholders reading information on both types of platforms seems limited. This becomes even more complicated when considering the role of external media in the formation of consumers' attitudes towards Arla.

A third conclusion to be derived from my research relates to the role of the blog during the Cartoon Crisis. I illustrated that in interplay with other communication platforms, Arla's blog proved its worth as a crisis communication channel during the crisis. Some characteristics of this particular communication platform stand out. Firstly, it was utilised to monitor public opinion as it presented itself in the blogosphere, thereby informing what needed to be communicated on more formal channels, e.g. in newsletters. This is perhaps the most significant difference setting the blog apart from the other examined crisis communication platforms. Since newsletters and making statements in external media both represents traditional, one-way communication, the role of the blog in Arla's crisis communication represents a showdown between the widely recognised transmission-model of communication and a more dialogic communication model between organisations and stakeholders. As exemplified by this case study, organisations can possibly benefit dearly from this move if they use it appropriately. That is, monitoring the external sphere for early warning signs and for sounding out the situation during the crisis as a way to understand what needs to be communicated on other channels is exclusively the property of the blog. Secondly, the blog served as a direct communication channel targeting the organisation's stakeholders, in particular Arla critics. The communication strategies used on the blog showed internal consistency as well as consistency with communication on the other platforms. This was illustrated by my identification and analyses of several crisis response strategies on each platform. While not being the main purpose of my research, I was also able as an additional outcome of my analysis to suggest two new strategies which in the hindsight of the Cartoons Crisis can be added to the SCCT. The first proposed alteration is the inclusion of *dissociation* as an independent strategy to be used in cases where the attribution of organisational crisis responsibility is minimal but the organisation is nonetheless involved in the crisis. A second proposed alteration is that the strategy *referencing external authorities* is included as a reinforcing strategy particularly well-suited for use on blogs. This inclusion supports the idea that organisations can benefit from adding this platform to its crisis communication.



## 5.1. Implications

Having thus presented the findings of my research, I will now briefly point to its implications for both companies and for future research.

First of all, my research exemplified that, as a supplement to other communication channels, blogs have a *raison d'être* in crisis communication and that the medium can perform roles different from traditional media. Furthermore, as demonstrated in my study, it was indeed possible for Arla to communicate consistently during the crisis despite the addition of the blog medium to its communication landscape. This arguably suggests that other companies can do the same. Benefitting from our knowledge of Arla's organisation of communication, other companies that wish to become more open by adding blogs to their communication channels should pay attention to their management of communication in terms of employed vertical and horizontal structures serving to secure consistency. However, this need to be balanced against a high degree of freedom allowed to the corporate bloggers. In fact, it was suggested that some inconsistency between communication on blogs and other media might actually validate the overall communication effort because it would increase the trustworthiness of the blogger. This idea is highly interesting but it is also devoid of academic foundation and therefore could be a suggestion topic for further research. One approach could be to examine closer through qualitative research, e.g. in-dept interviews, stakeholders' perception of crisis communication on different platforms as well as their understanding of the concept of trust as it relates to this.

Secondly, I suggested that a relationship exists between consistency and transparency in that the two concepts seem to be interconnected. That is, one can not exist without the other. I argued that as a consequence, organisations wishing to be perceived as communicating consistently and univocally need to make available all information to all stakeholders. Simultaneously, they need to do so in a way that enhances the probability of stakeholders to actually assess all information. This could for example be done by organisations disclosing information in a single place e.g. on the corporate website and/or make extensive use of linking between documents. In order to shed more light on ways to enhance consistency and transparency, further examination of the way stakeholders' assess corporate information is needed.



Thirdly and finally, I suggested that in the light of my research, new response strategies should be added to Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory. However, since my proposition is based on a single case study, this needs further validation. For example, the adjusted theory could be tested in case studies of different types of crises through a more deductive approach.

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## ***Empirical Foundation***

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### **Interview**

Vinther, Sanne (2010) – Interview conducted by Lisa Damgaard, 23.06.2010. A transcript of the interview is available in appendix 6 (electronic).