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Deutsche Telekom's spying scandal: An international application of the image repair discourse

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ABSTRACT

This analysis expands on the image restoration discourse and adapts it to the German business environment. It takes into account the cultural dimensions of uncertainty ambiguity and long-term orientation (Hofstede, 2011) to analyze Deutsche Telekom's image repair attempts in the aftermath of a spying scandal. The results reveal that the strategies of mortification and reduce offensiveness emerged within the frame of corrective action while denial was present in the overarching theme of transcendence. The use of corrective action and transcendence as larger frames for crisis communication meets the stakeholders' expectations in terms of a systematic overview of details and a focus on the crisis's context. The results reveal the need for continued research that ascertains ways of adapting the image repair discourse to international business environments. Finally, the results of this study can be used by companies that operate in Germany in their attempt to reduce the negative impact of a crisis on their reputation.

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1. Introduction

Using a spying scandal at Deutsche Telekom (DT), this study analyzes the company's image repair discourse (Benoit, 2014) based on Hofstede's (2011) dimensions of uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation. It provides an insight into the cultural implications of applying the image repair discourse to the German business environment. For a better understanding of the analysis, the paper starts by describing the crisis.

Headquartered in Bonn, Germany, Deutsche Telekom (DT) is currently Europe's biggest telecommunication giant and one of the most important providers of mobile/landline telephony, digital television and internet worldwide (Deutsche Telekom, 2015a). In 2008 the company was shaken by a spying scandal which was defined by a DT senior leader as "an absurd concoction of economic spying, power-hungry megalomania, paranoia, and a complete disregard for the freedom of press" (Spiegel Staff, 2008a, para. 1). Specifically, in April 2008, the leading German newspaper magazine, Spiegel, published a fax it received at its headquarters from the chief of a consulting firm in Berlin, Desa, which DT had allegedly hired to spy on its senior executive board, shareholders, and journalists that covered Deutsche Telekom (Spiegel Staff, 2008a, para. 3). The fax mentioned that DT failed to pay for the spying services Desda had provided among which snooping services that had been "unusually broad and sophisticated" even by the standards of intelligence agencies (Spiegel Staff, 2008a, para. 5). Further, the fax mentioned that DT's top management and the chair of the supervisory board had requested the spying services, which Desa ultimately performed between 2005 and 2008 (Spiegel Staff, 2008a, para. 6). These services involved

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monitoring and analyzing "hundred thousand landline and mobile connection data sets of key German journalists reporting on Telekom and their private contacts" (Spiegel Staff, 2008a, para. 4) and surveilling one of DT's shareholders, a company located in New York City (Spiegel Staff, 2008a, para. 5). Finally, the fax specified that the spying operations were performed to ascertain the sources that had leaked information about the company's financial plans to the media (Dowling, 2008; para. 2).

DT's image of a reliable telecommunications provider was further threatened a few months after the spying scandal had erupted when, the same newsmagazine, Spiegel, revealed that the personal data of over 17 DT million customers was available for sale on the black market. The data represented phone numbers, addresses, and email addresses of German celebrities, politicians and business leaders who were subscribers of DT's mobile subsidiary, T-Mobile (Bryant, 2008; para. 2). The public prosecutor's office in Bonn conducted an investigation during which eight of DT's (ex) employees among which the former DT chairman and a past supervisory board chairman (Balzi et al., 2008; para. 14) were considered suspects. DT's crisis came to an end in 2010, when the court decided to sentence DT's head of the Group Security department to three and a half years in prison (Deutsche Telekom, 2015b; para. 10).

DT's spying scandal engendered much debate in Germany's political circles for two main reasons. First, the German government is one of DT's primary shareholders and second, DT hired Desa, a spying company run by former Stasi informants, the East Germany's secret police (Balzi et al., 2008; para. 6). Consequently, DT's crisis had multiple political implications in a country sensitive to snooping as a result of its past communist and Nazi regimes. In addition, DT was also accused of spying on one of its subsidiaries in NYC and, hence, the crisis was likely to trigger external political implications. Yet, DT's snooping scandal was not unique in Germany or abroad. A few years before, two other German companies, namely Lufthansa (Balzi et al., 2008; para. 8) and Lidl (Spiegel Staff, 2008a, 2008b) had been accused of spying on their employees for similar reasons while, in the U.S., HP was involved in a snooping scandal during the same period as DT (Nakashima, 2006).

2. Literature review

According to the image repair discourse (Benoit, 2014) reputation is an asset that organizations attempt to protect in situations in which the former comes under threat. Benoit (2014) proposed five strategies for image repair, as follows: denial, evade responsibility, reduce offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Past studies looked into the image repair strategies enacted by politicians (Anagondahalli, 2013; Benoit, 2006; Benoit & Brinson, 1999; Fisher Liu, 2007; Len-Rios & Benoit, 2004), corporations (Benoit, 1995; Blaney, Benoit, & Brazeal, 2002; Brinson & Benoit, 1996; Harlow, Brantley, & Martin Harlow, 2011; King, 2006) and celebrities (Benoit, 1997a; Benoit, 1999; Brazeal, 2008; Glantz, 2010; Walsh & McAllister-Spooner, 2011). They ascertained that the main communicative acts are the same for both corporations and individuals (Benoit, 1997b) and differences reside in the fact that celebrities and companies have more resources they can invest in image repair attempts (Benoit, 1997b) as opposed to regular individuals. On the other hand, companies's crisis communication efforts may be hampered by the legal department which can restrict the enactment of certain image repair strategies out of litigation concerns (Benoit, 1997b).

Several studied conducted in the past applied the image repair discourse to an international context. These studies looked into public diplomacy efforts to manage a country's image (Drumheller & Benoit, 2004; Peijuan, Ting, & Pang, 2009; Zhang & Benoit, 2004) and corporate practices in the aftermath of crises (Huang, Lin & Su, 2005). For example, Drumheller and Benoit (2004) analyzed the cultural issues within the image repair strategies enacted by the U.S. Navy after the collision of the USS Greeneville with a Japanese trawler. The analysis revealed that U.S. Navy's apology came too late and, therefore, the image repair attempts were less successful with the Japanese people who aimed to have the USS Greeneville's captain courtmartialled. Further, Zhang and Benoit (2004) studied Saudi Arabia's image repair strategies in the aftermath of 9/11 and concluded that the image repair strategies had been partially effective since a 2000 Washington Post poll revealed that 44% of the Americans viewed Saudi Arabia as an enemy. In addition, Peijuan et al. (2009) analyzed the Chinese government's image repair discourse in the aftermath of accusations that questioned the reliability and safety of the products manufactured in China and determined that, corrective action appeared only at a later stage within the discourse because, in the Chinese culture, its enactment is associated with loss of face (Peijuan et al., 2009). Similarly, Huang et al.'s (2005) study on public relationship practices enacted by Taiwan's top-500 companies revealed that, because the Chinese culture involved a low-contextual style and a degree of indirectness (Huang et al., 2005, p. 236), corporate image repair strategies were more likely to revolve around differentiation, diversion, and showing consideration without apologizing (Huang et al., 2005, p. 236).

The present analysis differs from other international studies on image repair discourse because: (1) It tackled the application of the theory to the German business environment, which has not been done before, (2). It analyzed the crisis communication strategies based on two cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2011) that are paramount for understanding the effectiveness of the image restoration discourse in Germany. These dimensions are uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation.

3. Method

This study made use of rhetorical criticism, a method that enabled the researcher to engage in a "systematic process of illuminating and evaluating" persuasion within text (Andrews, Leff, & Terrill, 1998 as cited in Zhang & Benoit, 2004, p. 163). Further, the method allowed for the study of the relationship between the message and its context (Zhang & Benoit,

2004, p. 163) with the ultimate purpose of shedding light on the "placement, development, and relationship of ideas in the persuasive message(s)" (Zhang & Benoit, 2004, p. 163).

4. Deutsche Telekom's image repair strategies

DT's image repair attempts appeared predominantly during an interview given by the company's CEO Rene Obermann to Spiegel (Spiegel Staff, 2008a, 2008b), the leading German newsmagazine and the one that first revealed the snooping scandal. DT's crisis communication revolved predominantly around corrective action. To a certain degree the CEO's responses aimed to evade responsibility and reduce the offensiveness of the attack through transcendence and minimization. Interestingly, the image repair strategies of mortification and reduce offensiveness appeared within the larger frame of corrective action while denial emerged within the frame of transcendence. While surprising, these results are culture-specific and, therefore triggered by a crisis response adapted to the German environment. Each of the image repair strategies is discussed in more detail in the next section.

4.1. Denial

DT's image repair strategies involved little denial and pointed to the fact that the investigation was ongoing. For example, when DT's CEO was asked about his possible involvement in the spying scandal, he responded that "a person is considered innocent until proven guilty" and emphasized the need to let the investigation take its course. This form of denial occurred within two levels of transcendence. First, the discourse shifted toward the aphorism of innocent until proven guilty which may have increased persuasion by enabling the public to identify with the rhetor. Second, the use of transcendence enabled the rhetor to point to an external investigation and aimed to show the audiences that, by having a third party investigate the crisis, the company was cooperating, transparent, and committed to taking action to address the negative consequences of the scandal. Because in the aftermath of a crisis, companies may withhold information out of litigation concerns, the use of denial within the larger frame of transcendence is an effective image repair strategy that can compensate for the company's inability to provide much information in the immediate aftermath of a scandal.

4.2. Evade responsibility

DT's crisis response entailed few statements that aimed to evade responsibility. Specifically, when asked why he had not taken action sooner than he did, DT's CEO made use of defeasibility and stated that he had lacked information about the illegal activities that had been performed within the company. Further, his statements aimed to evade responsibility through the strategy of good intentions. For example, he asserted that he had no reason to question the reputation of the head of the security since the latter had held similar positions in other large corporations before joining DT. This response enabled the CEO to distance the company and himself from the person directly involved in the snooping crisis and shift the focus from the company to the telecom industry where the head of the security had held various positions.

4.3. Reduce offensiveness

DT's crisis response showed the emergence of the reduce offensiveness strategy mainly within the larger frame of corrective action. Specifically, this was evident when the CEO reassured the company's stakeholders that DT had high security standards and was committed to constant improvement. In addition, he added that the company's security procedures had been monitored by government regulatory agencies on a regular basis. When asked why the company did not inform the public prosecutor's office immediately after the board had heard of the crisis, the top executive responded that, by not doing so, they were able to conduct their own internal investigation, and thus, implemented changes in privacy and security that would not have been enacted so quickly had there been an immediate public investigation. In this case, the placement of reducing offensiveness statements within the larger frame of corrective action showcases the opportunity for renewal brought about by the company's decision not to make the matter public. This, in turn, enables the company to make amends for what could be perceived as lack of immediate action. Further, by pointing to an exact internal crisis management plan that was put into practice immediately after the spying scandal had become known, the CEO managed to reduce uncertainty vis-à-vis the company's ability to handle crises and, thus, to decrease the likelihood that DT's stakeholders would lose trust in the company's operations.

To a large extent, DT's CEO aimed to reduce offensiveness through minimization and transcendence. For example, when asked whether the scandal had an impact on the company's operations, the executive responded that, while major corporate clients were inquiring after details about the spying scandal, the crisis was less significant for private telecom customers. He also added that the company was nonetheless committed to addressing the crisis and its implications. Finally, the CEO's response entailed transcendence and pointed to the telecommunication industry as a whole as well as to the challenges the latter had been facing. For example, he explained that similar companies were experiencing the same mistrust and asserted that the tensions within DT's culture stemmed from the need to restructure the staff in a highly competitive market in which DT's services had been losing ground. Further, the CEO placed the crisis into an even larger context and argued that

the German economy was facing the dissatisfaction of the people whose salaries had not been keeping up with the price increases. He also pointed to the fact that half of the German population had been against the social market system.

4.4. Corrective action

Corrective action was the image repair strategy that DT employed the most. Specifically, DT's CEO discussed the fact that he informed the company's chief counsel and head of the corporate crime department about the spying scandal the next day after he had found out about it and asked them to conduct an investigation and propose solutions. He further justified the decision not to have informed the public prosecutor's office immediately by stating that DT had no legal obligation to do so.

DT's repair discourse made additional use of corrective action when the reporter asked the CEO to justify the long time it took the company to take action. In answering to this question, the executive provided a detailed timeframe of the events at the end of which he stated that it would be hard to imagine how the company could have acted sooner. Specifically, he argued that he had informed the DT head of the supervisory board two days after he had learned about the scandal and the public prosecutor's office two weeks after that. Yet, in addition to providing the exact details of the actions taken, the CEO's response also entailed surprise and impatience as he exclaimed: "Oh, come on! Where was there a delay? [. . .] It's hard to imagine how we could have done this faster." Through the enactment of corrective action, the senior executive let the audience know that the company had been taking the necessary steps to ensure that there would be no similar scandals in the future and that the company would use all of the available communication channels to inform its customers about the security procedures it was enacting. These steps included a restructuring of the security area, the implementation of a code of behavior for the security department as well as hiring a former deputy of the German Federal Office of Criminal Investigation (Spiegel Staff, 2008a, 2008b, para. 11) to join the board. Such statements aimed to indirectly reassure DT's stakeholders that the company was committed to preventing similar crises from reoccurring in the future.

4.5. Mortification

Past research on crisis communication stressed the importance of mortification in the aftermath of a crisis for which a company bears responsibility (Coombs, 2014; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007). In this respect, DT's image repair strategy is a surprising result. For example, when asked to apologize on behalf of his company, the CEO stated that he had already apologized to the editor-in-chief of a German business magazine (Spiegel Staff, 2008a, 2008b, para. 13) and stated that the entire scandal was deplorable. The executive further contended that he would apologize on behalf of the company to everyone affected once the investigation reached its conclusions and added that: "Simply issuing general niceties at this point without knowing who else may have been affected doesn't make any sense to me" (Spiegel Staff, 2008a, 2008b, para. 15). This use of mortification emerged within the larger frame of corrective action soon after and as a means to justify the lack of a direct apology. Specifically, the CEO stressed the fact that, by not apologizing publicly in the aftermath of the scandal, he was able to protect the company and its employees to the detriment of his own reputation.

5. Evaluation/conclusion

DT's spying scandal represented a threat to the company's image. The CEO's response in the aftermath of the crisis revolved predominantly around corrective action. Reduce offensiveness and evading responsibility strategies were present to a lesser degree. The surprising result of this analysis is DT's little to no use of mortification and the CEO's reluctance to express remorse for the company's wrongdoing. This result is even more surprising since the snooping scandal engendered much political debate around the freedom of the press in a country in which spying is a sensitive topic and triggers tragic memories from the past communist and Nazi regimes. Moreover, the fact that the German government was DT's primary shareholder added further political connotations and implications of the crisis. Since DT faced a crisis for which they were held responsible by their stakeholders, one would have expected an image repair discourse that revolved primarily around apology (Coombs, 2014) and corrective action. Yet, while the current analysis revealed that DT shunned mortification, the company managed to transform the spying scandal into an opportunity for renewal and is nowadays known for its data privacy and security standards. In addition, its performance and revenue were not negatively impacted by the spying scandal (Deutsche Telekom, 2015a). For example, in 2009, a year after the spying scandal had erupted, DT's revenue was 2.9 billion euros higher than in 2008. Its cash flow operations reached 15.8 billion, thus making the company more successful than in the previous year, in which those amounted to 15.4 billion. Finally, in 2009 DT had over 32, 0000 more employees than in 2008 (Deutsche Telekom, 2009).

While the application of the image repair discourse rendered surprising results in the analysis of DT's crisis communication, it is important to note that the image repair discourse was developed and applied predominantly in the United States. Therefore, it bears significance to assess the results of this analysis by taking into account the variable of culture. Namely, contrary to the American culture, the German cultural milieu is characterized by a high level of uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2011). In other words, in the German culture individuals do not tolerate ambiguity to the extent to which they do in the US. On Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance scale, Germany has a score of 65, and the US 46 (The Hofstede Center, 2015). In Germany issues are approached deductively and through a systematic overview that offers enough details to reduce uncertainty (Hofstede, 2011). This propensity for uncertainty avoidance can explain why DT's crisis communication focused

so heavily on corrective action to the detriment of other image repair strategies. Namely, the company attempted to meet the stakeholders' expectations in terms of dissipating ambiguity because, for the latter, an apologetic discourse would have been less significant than the details of the plan the company aimed to enact to prevent similar crises from reoccurring.

Moreover, although emerging to a lesser extent, mortification and reduce offensiveness strategies were present within the frame of corrective action. In DT's crisis response, corrective action was not only a strategy in itself as it was the case in previous research on image repair strategies conducted on American crisis discourse. Rather, corrective action was a prevailing strategy and an overarching theme of image repair within which other crisis response tactics emerged, such as mortification and reduce offensiveness. The enactment of corrective action as an overarching frame enabled the company to present its stakeholders a detailed plan and its intentions to transform the crisis into an opportunity for renewal. In addition, DT's CEO attempted to reduce uncertainty by stressing that, had he made the scandal public, the positive changes now extant in his company's operations and policies would not have been implemented as quickly. Further, his crisis communication entailed very specific details of how the crisis unfolded and the way in which the company addressed it, all of which were meant to ensure the company's stakeholders that a similar crisis was unlikely to strike again.

Further, the German culture is characterized by a focus on a long-term orientation (The Hofstede Center, 2015). Specifically, it is pragmatic and individuals are prone to consider that accuracy is contextual and dependant on a specific situation (Hofstede, 2011). According to The Hofstede Center (2015) Germany's score on long-term orientation is 83, in high contrast to that of America which is 26. The penchant for pragmatism and focus on specific situations explains the emergence of denial within the frame of transcendence. Specifically, DT's top executive shifted the blame and placed the scandal in a larger context, namely, that of the German business environment. His response entailed details about the uniqueness of the developments in the telecomm industry, the struggles of the telecom companies in a highly competitive market as well as the Germans' overall dissatisfaction with the economy and their life standard.

Several of DT's responses may appear tactless if assessed via the image repair discourse and without taking into account the variable of culture. Yet, these statements appear more appropriate if assessed via the lens of the uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation dimensions (Hofstede, 2011). For example, when asked why the company had not taken action earlier than it did, the CEO explained, "Oh, come on! Where was there a delay?" However, in his response, the executive meticulously pointed to the timeline and showed the exact steps the company took to address the crisis internally. This strategy was therefore aligned with the stakeholders' long-term orientation and their focus on context. In addition, the details DT's CEO provided were meant to meet the stakeholders' expectations in terms of reducing ambiguity and avoiding uncertainty.

Furthermore, the CEO bluntly stated that he did not inform the public prosecutor's office immediately after he had learned about the crisis because his company had no legal obligation to do so. While crisis communication research conducted on case studies in the US stresses the importance of transparency in the aftermath of a crisis (Coombs, 2014; Ulmer et al., 2007), this response meets the dimension of long-term orientation and the focus on the context. Finally, the lack of an apologetic discourse and the directness with which DT's executive refused to engage in mortification until the investigation would come to an end can be regarded as yet another tactless crisis response. However, the very specific details of corrective action that the CEO employed, may have rendered the need for an apology less significant. Specifically, the overall crisis communication strategy can be viewed as effective since it focused on reducing uncertainty and emphasized the context in which the spying scandal took place.

While this analysis focused on DT, I argue that its conclusions can be taken into consideration by American companies that operate in Germany such as Google, Apple, etc. In times of crisis, companies should tailor their communication practices by decreasing uncertainty and providing exact details in terms of their corrective action. Such details meet the stakeholders' needs for reduced ambiguity. Further, by focusing on the specifics of the context in which a crisis takes place, American companies can meet the long-term orientation that characterizes the German culture. Finally, the image repair discourse (Benoit, 1995; Benoit, 2014) has generated a tremendous line of work in American academia. Its theoretical and practical applications are invaluable. Similar to most of the public relations literature, the image repair discourse was developed in the United States and theorists and practitioners abroad are adapting it without making allowances for the variable of culture. The need to adapt and to further develop the public relations field by testing the paradigms developed in the US in international settings was stressed extensively by global public relations theorists (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2012). Consequently, future research on image restoration discourse should focus on analyzing crisis communication strategies in various international milieus. Such case studies can take into account the variable of culture and expand on the image restoration discourse to enable practitioners to adapt it to the business environment in which their companies operate.

Acknowledgements

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