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# Proactive crisis communications in public institutions

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** The air traffic controllers’ strike that took place in Spain from the third to the sixth of December 2010 is a paradigmatic case of crisis communications. **Objectives:** The objective of this research article is to analyse the public communications strategies implemented, on the one hand, by the Ministry of Public Works and the Spanish government and, on the other, by the promoters of the strike, the air traffic controllers union. **Methods:** The study is based on the analysis of the news coverage of five of the main Spanish newspapers and the impact of the strike on the social networks. **Conclusions:** The results indicate that the Spanish government implemented a better communications plan, which was based on anticipation, proactivity and the use of the storytelling technique, i.e. the narration of a story with 'good' and 'bad' characters (the citizens and the government, on the one hand, and the promoters of the strike, on the other), which had a huge impact of the public opinion. The communication “strategy” of the promoters of the strike failed in its mission as it was characterised by improvisation, reactive attitudes and lack of coordination.

## Keywords

Crisis communication; social networks; strike; institutional communication, proactivity, storytelling

## Contents

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Translation by CA Martínez Arcos, Ph.D. (Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas)

## 1. Introduction

The main objective of this study is to identify the specific actions developed as part of the communications strategy implemented by the protagonists of a particular conflict: the air traffic controllers’ strike that took place in Spain during the four-day Constitution Day holiday in 2010, which led the Spanish Prime Minister to declare, for the first time in the history of the Spanish

democracy, a state of emergency. To be precise, the objective is to describe the communication strategies implemented by public bodies such as the Spanish government, the Ministry of Public Works, the Ministry of Defence, the political opposition, and the Spanish Airports and Air Navigation agency (Aena), against the communication strategy of the protagonist of the crisis: the Air Traffic Controllers Union (USCA). The article also evaluates the position of other professionals of the sector such as pilots and airport staff, and the most affected sectors, the tourist and business sectors, and, of course, the air travellers. The identification of the communicative actions that were part of the comprehensive and strategic communications plans will be based on the analysis of their impact on the quality Spanish newspapers and the major social networks.

The impact of this crisis was such that it affected 650,000 travellers and led the Prime minister, for the first time in the history of the Spanish democracy, to declare a state of emergency, which involved the intervention of the army and the establishment of more severe penalties, including jail, for the pilots willing to persist with the strike.

The social reaction to the messages disseminated in the media by the parties involved in this event is what determined the effectiveness of their comprehensive communications plans, which were characterised by the predominance of proactive communications policies over reactive actions. This strategy was implemented at a key moment: before the crisis broke out.

## **2. Objectives and hypotheses**

The objectives that guide this research are:

- a) To identify and describe the communications policies developed throughout 2010 by the two opposing parties: on the one hand, the Spanish government and its Ministry of Public Works, and, on the other, the air traffic controllers and their union.
- b) To measure the social impact of the communications policies of the government and the air traffic controllers through the analysis of the main Spanish newspapers' coverage of the strike that took place from the third to the fifth of December 2010.
- c) To examine the impact of the Internet, in general, and its social networks, in particular, as new players in institutional and crisis communications policies.

The fulfilment of these objectives is intended to test the following hypotheses:

1. The fact that airports are vulnerable spaces where a crisis can emerge at any time (natural disasters, terrorism, accidents and recurring labour disputes) determines the communication actions of the public bodies responsible for their well operation, as they are aware that information plays a decisive role. In the case under study, the design and implementation of proactive communications policies, even before the conflict broke out, were the main tools used to put an end to a confrontation that lasted for more than a year.

2. The communications policy of the air traffic controllers and their union representatives, instead of counteracting their starting negative public perception, worsened their bad reputation and negative image, which was strategically promoted by the Government.

3. Faced with the crisis, the space provided by the Internet, materialised in the social networks, particularly Facebook and Twitter, blogs and forums, is one of the main independent communication platforms. Its use is decisive for the development of a proactive strategy. But it is also the main communication platform for the actors that have the public opinion against them and dare to issue statements with a degree of freedom and in a variety of forms that would not be allowed in the traditional media.

4. In conflicts and states of chaos, like the crisis under study, consumer associations acquire a protagonist role in the media because they are committed to help the affected consumers-citizens who do not know how, where or when to complain.

## **2. State of the art review**

### **3.1. Communication management in new crises**

All communication scholars and professionals agree that a crisis may break out at anytime, anywhere, in any public, private or semi-public organisation. In the majority of cases the time and way in which a crisis breaks out cannot be predicted. However, preventive plans may be developed to face these events. Alberto Mariñas (2008: 54) speaks of the "ubiquity of the crisis" and highlights that its origin is relatively simple and that there are an endless number of possible triggering factors.

In addition to the fact that crisis communication is one of the areas of institutional communication that has been developed the most since the 1980s, it was mainly in the 1980s when an increased awareness was developed, particularly in private organisations, towards situations of crisis which, on many occasions, may result in the disappearance of the organisation and the loss not only of customers but also of a more valuable asset, the institutional reputation and image. In fact, the concept of crisis that was adopted in the field of communication was developed in business administration theory. Communications consultants and scholars are increasingly aware that most companies are not prepared to deal with a crisis. Enrique Alcat (2008: 1) points out the percentage of unprepared companies reaches 99%.

The in-depth knowledge of the nature of the crises that may be faced by a company, a City Hall, a Government, an airport, an NGO, a school or a hospital, among others, is crucial for its management and resolution, and to ensure that the damaged image of the organisation is not further deteriorated and can seize the moment to present itself to society and its publics with a renewed and enhanced image.

Therefore, it is important for organisations to know as accurately as possible the origin of the crises that pose a real threat to them. To this end, this section offers a brief description of the different types of crises identified by researchers from the field of corporate communication and public relations. Lesly (1991: 23) differentiates between issues and crises and is against the mixing of these concepts and including everything in crisis management because it places the company in a defensive mentality, very focused in reducing vulnerabilities. Bland, however, blends crisis with negative media coverage and defines crisis as a serious incident that affects human security, the environment and/or the reputation of the product or the company, and that has received negative media coverage. Along this line, Saura, who includes this relationship in his work, makes a nuance and provides her own definition of crisis in relation to the public and the media (Saura, 2005: 13):

“A serious situation affecting a company/institution in any of its duties and has the potential to escalate in terms of intensity and/or can harm its key publics or groups of interest and/or can generate a negative impact in the media, and/or can create a negative public image and/or affect the results or viability of the institution”.

Rodríguez and Sádaba (1999: 169) explain that the critical situation that accompanies a crisis tends to get worse because it emerges in unexpected ways and forces the company to take quick decisions without taking enough time to evaluate the impact of these decisions. That is why they define crisis communication as an area of corporate communication whose purpose is to provide solutions to the critical situation in its informative dimension.

The response time is crucial in crises according to Reinhardt (cited by González, 1998) who distinguishes the following crises categories depending on the time which the affected organisation has to implement its communications policies: 1) immediate crisis, in which the company does not have time to obtain information and implement a plan of action; 2) crisis in development, in which the organisation has some time to obtain information about the crisis and to act; and 3) permanent crisis, which last for long periods of time and appear continuously in the media. In this line, Berge (1990: 11) explains that all crises can be classified within the following two categories: 1) chronic, in which decisions are based on previous mistakes, and 2) acute, when the damage is more immediate.

Categories aside, Fita (Losada, 2004: 196) underlines that all crises have common characteristics: surprise, uniqueness, urgency, instability and decline in the quality of communication. If there is a decisive element in the management of a crisis, it is the time. And this time has changed with the advent and spread use of the Internet, which has led to the emergence of the “new crisis”.

By default, all crises are new; they are different from each other. However, for this study, the new crises are those that develop in other scenarios in which the time is the main enemy for their detection and management and their acceptance or rejection in the public opinion. Internet, email and social networks are key means to control messages and the evaluation of the various actions carried out by the crisis managers. Social participation has thus become a serious enemy and, at the same time, an ally to hold on to before, during and after a crisis.

This revolution which involves managing a myriad of comments, in the middle of the crisis, on the actions that are part of both proactive and reactive communications policies requires the creation of a communication strategy which focuses in time management in specific terms: the time of information receivers, who are the protagonists and channels to disseminate messages charged with opinions.

Therefore, the awareness of the different types of crises that can threaten an organisation is important as it helps crisis managers to develop a specific communications plan for each type of crisis, based on the premise that the publics are now protagonists, consumers and disseminators of the rumours that accompany each crisis, of the surprise, of the comments of the competition and, of course, of the corporate messages of the organisation suffering the crisis.

### **3.2. Design of a comprehensive communications plan**

A communications policy is, above all, a management policy framed within a comprehensive communications plan. Discourse coherence and its correct dissemination are two of the fundamental elements of an effective policy of a comprehensive communications plan. Both are intertwined in the daily supply of information. The drafting of the communication axis of each of the applicable policies in the organisation and their continuous (yet orderly and not overlapped) dissemination increase the influence of the organisation in its target society (Álvarez and Caballero, 2001).

Ramírez De la Piscina puts the emphasis on the planning, coordination, seriousness, the abandonment of improvisation and dialectical dirty play, the deployment of qualified personnel (journalists, experts in public and human relations) and, above all, on the acquisition of a formal commitment to the truth, a pact based on ethics and honesty (De la Piscina, 1995).

These values are often detected in the messages issued as part of a communication strategy. At this point we must take into account the contribution made by Alcoceba Hernando, who points out that the social image of institutions depends largely on the quality of the management and the correct information treatment developed by the institutions. This also applies to public bodies, and thus they cannot forget about their social visibility and justification (Alcoceba Hernando, 2010).

After having addressed the importance of developing a communications plan that includes a communications policy that is specific to each type of crisis, it is important to examine the level of communication that is going to be required. This will facilitate to decide whether we need a reactive or proactive communications policy or both, depending on the situation.

### **3.3. Communications policies**

In the design of a communications policy, the relations with the press are part of an organism's external communication, but do not exclude the internal communication. Companies and institutions still tend to measure the success or failure of a communications policy depending on what the media publishes or on whether they appear on the media. As predicted by the experts a few years ago,

companies have gone from the seduction of the image to the obsession with the image, despite that according to many authors, like Villafañe, the idea that a large presence in media is the best policy is an erroneous assumption (1998: 210).

External communication is a decisive tool in the communication processes of public organisations. In this regard, Canel points out that the survival of the public institution is linked to its ability to define itself, to advertise its objectives, to justify its actions, and to involve others in these actions (Canel Crespo, 1999: 28). An organisation contributes to the creation of a certain public image through its external communication. In this sense, Alcoceba points out that the communication exchange between the institution and the public is fundamental in the communication strategy of public bodies. Sometimes this process does not receive the importance it deserves, which is a serious obstacle in the visibility of institutions (Alcoceba, 2010). Here we must always keep in mind that communication is an instrument at the service of management, and is not management model. It is not a goal, but a means to an end (Weil, 1992: 223).

### **3.3.1. Reactive communication**

A reactive communications policy is the one that communicates only when it is strictly necessary. This need will be assessed sometimes by the affected organisation and some other times by the external circumstances, for example the media pressure exercised by the affected people who encourage the organisation to inform. The latter case is usually accompanied by lack of foresight, coordination of messages and chaos.

This reactivity portrays negatively the organisation to the public opinion because it makes it look to be defensive, and lacking ideas or arguments to take the initiative and offer an honest and sincere position that is not afraid (if necessary) to accept its mistakes. Martínez Fernández goes beyond and affirms that when an organisation in crisis adopts a reactive attitude the social media take control of the communication and put the organisation under great pressure which, as a general rule, makes the organisation to commit various important and significant errors (Martínez Fernández, 2008: 42).

In contrast, there are scholars like Booth (1998) who affirm that reactivity is the best ally of the crisis as it subjects the organisation to the evolutionary changes of the situation.

Jordi Xifra collects the three possible responses suggested by Jones and Chase for a potential conflict. The first response is the reactive one, which is “used in cases where the company decides not to change its policy, procedures or practices in relation to the situation” (Xifra, 2009: 96). The other two options are the adaptation and dynamic responses. Xifra argues that the reactive formula has been developed successfully in certain situations. However, it should be noted that a reactive communications policy frequently prolongs the duration of the crisis, which can be a tragedy and not a victory. Reactive or not, everybody agrees that “silence is never a good option” (Martín, 1999: 60). Sterile organisations from the standpoint of communication, and whose image has a profile low in public or is already bad, they generate a negative inertia that will serve as a powerful amplifier of a crisis by increasing their extent and intensity.

### 3.3.2. Proactive communication

Before one can define proactive communication it is important to note that there are many authors who defend proactivity not only as a strategy in itself, but as a philosophy or a way of understanding crisis management. A proactive communications policy involves designing communication actions before the start of the crisis. However, the maximum level of communication leadership is only developed after the crisis broke out, regardless of the available information and whether the organisation knows the origin of the crisis. Transparency in the dissemination of the available information, the availability to attend the media and, above all, the commitment to always telling the truth are the hallmarks of a proactive communications policy framed within a crisis prevention plan that is part of a comprehensive communications strategy.

The first objective of a proactive communications policy is to regain, as much as possible, the control of the situation and that is why this option is based on becoming the presenters of the information that is offered during a crisis. In other words, the objective is to stay one step ahead of the media and the different publics. However, Martínez Fernández clarifies that taking the lead initiative does not mean rushing as soon as the first sign of danger appears. Instead, taking the lead involves implementing actions carefully planned for a given situation.

In this regard, it is important to remember the effects of proactive management in case, whose tragedy was as intense as the media coverage: the crash of a Spanair airplane in August 2008 in Barajas Airport. García Santamaría points out that, except for the first eight hours in which the airline did not provide any information, the airline did react promptly to some demands. “A total of seven press conferences were held in Madrid, which is almost a journalistic milestone, by this company and various ministerial authorities, in addition to those offered by one of the survivors. However, this abundance of appearances did not mean greater empathy with those affected by the disaster and their families, nor contributed to clarify the real causes of the event” (García Santamaría, 2010).

A communications policy that is implemented late in a degraded state of opinion, with little consistent even contradictory messages, may not be effective because the margin for testing is insufficient. “It is essential to be present from the beginning, before making the project public and requesting any authorisation in order to avoid possible leaks” (Rodríguez, 2004: 130).

The way to be prepared to prevent and deal with a crisis is therefore prevention and planning. The ways to do it are as varied as there are scholars in this discipline. However, most scholars agree on some points, such as the study of the different publics, the design of a crisis management manual, the formation of a crisis management team, and a post-crisis audit. This is just one of many ways of planning a crisis. Villafañe includes in his communication management manual (*Manual de Gestión Comunicativa*) the development of a strategic corporate image plan, a map of audiences, and the annual communications plan (Villafañe, 1998: 294). For his part, Carlos Paniagua clarifies that the development of the crisis management plan must be developed in parallel with the communications

plan. "Four fundamental sections must be developed: the objective to achieve in each case; the message that will be issued in each case, the most appropriate audiences and communication channels, and the action plan" (Bel Mallén, 2004: 202).

### **3.4. Honesty and proactivity, also on the Internet**

Today's journalists use the Internet as much as or even more than the direct sources, which not long ago used to be the main way of getting information. At the same time, the public, the consumer of that information, trust more the messages published in social networks, mainly Facebook and Twitter, than the messages disseminated by official and institutional sources. The new online tracking tools allow users to know in real time what is being said about a particular organisation, which can be used to optimise crisis and risk prevention programs. These tools useful instruments to develop communication strategies in situations of crisis based on proactivity because they are more efficient to try to control the chaos, reduce times, eliminate distortions in messages and create the best communication climate to manage the post-crisis.

Carlos Paniagua recommends the inclusion in corporate communications policy of a plan to place the institution and its representatives in the main digital channels, professional social networks and websites. "This way, the organisation will generate information in the online media and will improve its position in the search engines" (Paniagua, 2010: 1-22). These will be the main objectives in situations of crisis, without forgetting the most important principles previously outlined: initiative, honesty and proactivity. So, it is the way, not the objective, what changes.

David Bollero has introduced the term crisis 2.0 and defined in three words the way in which organisations must act before a crisis breaks out and/or develops in the Internet: speed, visibility and credibility (Bollero, 2008: 46). It is important to clarify, however, that online and offline strategies must go hand in hand within a comprehensive crisis plan which must foresee situations of conflict that may lead to media chaos. One of the ways to be prepared for crises is to identify the official spokesmen, who will play a central role in the development of the events and the dissemination of the key messages of the organisation. It is precisely in the dissemination of messages that blogs acquire a greater importance because, as Antonio Fumero and Genís Roca point out, they impact the information dynamics of the Internet (2007: 36).

The development of the Internet in crisis management shows a great potential to develop a clearly proactive strategy. Martínez Fernández adds that the Internet can act as a mass communication medium, since it offers the organisation the possibility to operate from its Cabinet Crisis, which acts as the editorial room of a news outlet, so it can exercise a total control over the messages. The condition for this to happen is to develop a strategy based on transparency in order to gain the trust of the public and the social media.



#### **4. Case study: the strike of the air traffic controllers**

##### **4.1. Context of the problem**

On the third of December 2010, at the start of Spain's holiday to celebrate Constitution Day and the religious festivities of the Immaculate Conception, one of the most important events of the year, at 1700 local time, Madrid-Barajas Airport closed its airspace due to the fact that air traffic controllers abandoned their posts alleging that they were in no conditions to work. The same situation happened shortly afterwards in the Balearic and Canary Islands. During the night all the control centres, with the exception of the one at Seville, were inoperative, as well as all the airport towers, although Barcelona worked at half-throttle after 10 PM. The first consequence of this covert strike was 250,000 stranded travellers at the airports on the first night.

This initiated a crisis that was mainly managed from the Ministry of Public Works, directed by José Blanco, but had the participation of many actors: government officials, the Spanish airport Authority (Aena), the air traffic controllers, the affected travellers, political parties, consumer associations, business owners from the tourism sector, experts and the media. The media chaos originated by this conflict, which took hundreds of thousands of passengers by surprise, led people to put the blame on the airlines. However, the government put in motion a strategy based on a proactive communications policy specifically designed to control a crisis caused by air traffic controllers. However, the union that represented the protagonists of the strike, the air traffic controllers, adopted a reactive communications policy. The following sections will analyse all the communication actions carried out to respond to the different events that took place on the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of December.

However, before we start to describe these actions it is important to briefly note that the problem between air traffic controllers and the government is not new. Since 2009 the media have covered the various conflicts that have arisen between different public institutions and trade unions, which would face an unprecedented crisis in Spain a year later.

The employment situation of the air traffic controllers and the struggle to improve and/or maintain their salaries was known by the Spanish society since the 24<sup>th</sup> of November, 2009, when the President of Aena, Juan Ignacio Lema, stated that the average annual salary of air traffic controllers was €350,000. The events that took place after that moment are decisive to understand, on the one hand, the situation that led air traffic controllers to go on a strike of such magnitude; and, on the other, the exhaustion that led the government to take decisive action to deal with the problem with the support of the public opinion, despite of its low popularity.

2009:

- On 2 December, the director of aerial navigation, Carmen Libero, announces changes to the agreement with air traffic controllers to lower costs. December 29, the Minister of Public Works, José Blanco, accuses the Air Traffic Controllers of carrying out a strike concealed in the Canary Island airports.

2010:

- On 11 January, the Spanish Air Traffic Controllers Union (USCA) and Aena resume negotiations on the second collective agreement for the sector.
- In February, the air traffic controllers and Aena blame each other of abandoning the negotiations and on 5 February the Council of Ministers approve a decree that gives back Aena the management and control of air traffic, which was in the hands of air traffic controllers since 1999.
- On 26 February, the USCA announces that it is considering legal action against the governmental decree, but that it will not call for any strike. Two months later, the new law that establishes new working conditions for air traffic controllers, including the lowering of salaries, comes into force.
- On 12 May, the Spanish High Court dismisses the lawsuit filed by the USCA against the new law. At that time the airlines accused the air traffic controllers of causing delays and widespread cancellations.
- On 20 July, the Minister of Public Works announces that the government will deploy military air traffic controllers. A day later, Aena accuses the air traffic controllers of organising a covert strike to put pressure on the negotiations of the new agreement. The same month the government approves a Royal Decree which allows entrusting air traffic control to private non-Aena air traffic controllers. This is when the Prime Minister approves a new decree that regulates the workday of air traffic controllers, which is maintained in 1,670 hours, plus 80 overtime hours.
- On 3 August, 98% of the air traffic controllers authorise their Union to call for a strike, and on 13 August the USCA and Aena signed a pre-agreement that accepts the working conditions established by the Ministry of Public Works in exchange for more flexible working hours depending on the workload of each centre.
- On 7 October, air traffic controllers abandoned the negotiation of their second contract with Aena for breach of agreements.
- On 26 November the USCA announces the closure of airspace in Galicia from the weekend and that this closure will be extended during December to the whole of Spain due to excess of work hours.
- On 3 December, the government ratifies in a Royal Decree that the maximum number of hours that air traffic controllers will be able to work is 1,670. As protest, air traffic controllers abandon their jobs and force the closure of airspace.

## 5. Methods

This study is based on two research methods. On the one hand, it involves a review of the coverage of the strike by newspapers in 2010 to establish the main features of the communications policy of the Spanish Government and the air traffic controllers. On the other hand, it uses content analysis to assess the results of both communications policies in the media. This method was chosen because our object of study focuses 90% in newspapers. To undertake the content analysis we followed the guidelines of Albert Kientz, for whom content analysis is practically a synonym for newspaper review, since it can only be applied to texts published in channels that are preserved through time (Kientz, 1974: 26).

The design of the content analysis categories was based on the methodological system designed by the Journalism School of the University of Missouri at Columbia (UMC), which has been used by in other research studies in Spain with satisfactory results. The quantitative analysis was complemented with the qualitative examination of selected texts and images.

### 5.1. Selection criteria. Print news media

In order to develop this study, we examined all the news stories that were published about the air traffic controllers' strike by the following national paid-for and printed newspapers: *El País*, *El Mundo*, *Público*, *El Correo* and *Abc*. All of these papers carried out a special coverage of the case. The selection of these newspapers was based on three criteria: number of readers, editorial line and area of circulation. In the first case, the five newspapers were among the most-sold papers in Spain during the period under study, according to Spain's print media circulation monitoring office (*OJD*). Regarding the editorial line, the study aimed to include newspapers with different positions towards the Spanish Government, which was led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero during the period under study. For this reason we included two papers with very critical positions towards the government (*Abc* and *El Mundo*), two with generally supportive positions (*El País* and *Público*), and one with a less defined position (*El Correo*). With regards to the area of dissemination, we included the *El Correo* to represent the regional press and expand the research beyond the national newspapers.

*El País* published a total of nine pages about strike under the heading "Unprecedented chaos in airports" on 4 December; 18 pages under the heading "Unprecedented chaos in airports. Stranded travellers" on 5 December; and 7 pages under the heading "State of emergency. The people responsible for the chaos" on 6 December.

*El Mundo* published 6 pages about the strike on 4 December; 18 pages on 5 December; and 6 pages on 6 December. *El Correo* published 6 pages on the strike under the heading "Air traffic controllers' wildcat strike" on 4 December; 13 pages under the heading "The rebellion of the air traffic controllers" on 5 December; and 6 pages under the same heading on 6 December.

The *Público* newspapers published 5 pages about the air traffic controllers strike under the heading “Chaos in the holiday: airports” on 4 December; 12 pages on 5 December; and 7 pages under the heading “Consequences of the chaos at the airports” on 6 December. Finally, *Abc* dedicated 13 pages to the strike under the heading “Blackmailing the State” on 4<sup>th</sup> of December; 22 pages under the heading “Spain, in a state of emergency” on 5 December; and 17 pages on 6 December.

## **5.2. Selection criteria. Social networks and Internet forums**

The study also took into consideration the impact of the events that took place during this three-day crisis in the Internet forums and social networks. Twitter users found out about the crisis breakout and its development before anyone else, to the point that they wrote thousands of tweets about the strike. The study also examined the Facebook page *Soy controlador y estoy orgulloso de serlo* (‘I’m an air traffic controller and I am proud of it’) and the post titled *No controles* (“Do not control”) in the website [bloguionistas.wordpress.com](http://bloguionistas.wordpress.com), which was one of the most visited and shared sites on the Internet, mainly on Twitter and Facebook. Finally, we also examined the Facebook group *Por la verdad sobre el tema* (“The truth about the subject”) created by the air traffic controllers. With regard to blogs, this study selected one called *Controladores aéreos y otras hierbas* (“Air traffic controllers and other herbs”).

### **5.2.1. Temporal and thematic limits**

This case study focused on the events that occurred from the third to the sixth of December 2010, which are the first four days of one of the most important holidays of the year in Spain: the Constitution Day and the religious festivities of the Immaculate Conception, during which millions of citizens go travelling. It was during these four days that the crisis broke out.

## **5.3. Research methods**

This research is based on the quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the news stories published about the strike of air traffic controllers by the aforementioned Spanish newspapers during three days.

This study considered as units of analysis all the news stories about the air traffic controllers, as well as any news story about the protagonists of this event and with a direct relation to the subject matter: government institutions, politicians, actors from the aviation and tourism sectors, consumer associations, affected travellers, the media and experts. Pictures, infographics and cartoons have been also studied.

The study is based on the content analysis of a sample of 150 journalistic items, conveniently registered in various categories and variables, in order to carry out the subsequent tabulation of data: 34 items from *El País*; 36 from *El Mundo*; 18 from *El Correo*; 20 from *Público* and 42 from *Abc*. After the journalistic items were selected and chronological and thematically ordered, they were coded in SPSS 9.

#### 5.4. Categories of analysis

The analysis of the case is based on the examination of the different parts of the selected items. Thus, each selected item has been divided in different categories which have their respective variables. This analysis followed the instructions given by Krippendorff (1990: 109 and 110), who points out, quoting Kientz, that no unit should be excluded from the analysis due to the lack of suitable descriptive terms, and that no unit should belong to two categories or be represented by different specific data.

<b>Table 1. Categories of Analysis</b>
<b>1. Number of unit</b>
<b>2. Date</b>
<b>3. Newspaper</b>
<b>4. Size (number of pages)</b>
<b>5. Special heading (yes/no)</b>
<b>6. Author</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• News agency</li> <li>• Newspaper's writer</li> <li>• Newspaper's editorial team</li> <li>• Expert/columnist</li> <li>• Other</li> </ul>
<b>7. Genre</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• News article</li> <li>• Feature article</li> <li>• Chronological report</li> <li>• Interview</li> <li>• Brief report</li> <li>• Editorial</li> <li>• Opinion article</li> <li>• Photo-news</li> <li>• Letter to the editor</li> <li>• Other</li> </ul>
<b>8. Included in front page (yes/no)</b>
<b>9. Photography (yes/no)</b> 9.1. Size (number of columns) 9.2. Content

- Graphic
- Editorial cartoon
- Information panels
- José Blanco
- Affected passengers
- Passenger complaining
- Government. Crisis Committee
- Mariano Rajoy
- Military
- Air traffic controllers
- Others

### 9.3. Evaluation of the image

- Positive
- Negative
- Neutral

## 10. Heading

10.1. Number of columns (five, four, three, two, one)

10.2. Keywords of the headline

- Complaint
- Blackmail
- Threat
- Wild strike
- Poor conditions
- Chaos
- Outrage
- Irresponsibility
- Serious disobedience
- Economic cost
- State of emergency
- Rights of air traffic controllers
- Disciplinary proceedings
- Militarisation
- Normality
- Solution to the conflict

## 11. Sources

11.1. Number of sources

11.2. Classification of sources

- Government sources: Ministry of Public Works, José Blanco, Government, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, Elena Salgado, the Military, Aena, Aviation Safety Agency, National Institute of Consumers.
- Political parties: PP (Popular Party) -Mariano Rajoy, Soraya Sáez de Santamaría, Esteban González Pons-; PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) -Gaspar Zarrías-; *Izquierda Unida* (United Left Party); other).
- USCA (Air Traffic Controllers Union)
- SEPLA and pilots
- STAVLA (Spanish Cabin Crew Union)

- Airport staff (guards, taxi drivers, waiters, Eurocontrol)
- AECA (Spanish Airlines Association)
- Tourism sector: Travel Agencies Employers Association; President of Madrid’s businessmen; Spanish Confederation of Hotels and Tourist Accommodation; Spanish Confederation of Travel Agencies and Tour Operators; President of the Council of Tourism of the CEOE; President of the Hotel Employers; Confederation of Commerce of Madrid; others.
- Affected travellers
- Experts
- Penal Code
- Media
- Royal Decree
- BOE (Spain’s Official State Gazette)
- Social Networks: Facebook, Twitter, blogs (“Soy controlador y estoy orgulloso de serlo”; “No controles”; wordpress.com, “Por la verdad sobre el tema”; “Controladores aéreos y otras hierbas”)
- Consumers’ Associations: OCU (Consumers and Users Association); FACUA (Consumers in Action Association); UCE (Spanish Consumers Union); CECU (Consumers and Users Council); Ausbanc; ASGECO (General Association of Consumers); Association of Consumers and Users of Air Transport and Tour Travel; indemnizacionportuvuelo.com; lawyer Philip Izquierdo; Cremades & Calvo-Sotelo law firm; Consumers Union of the Basque Country).

**12. Number of statements**

**13. Number of pull quotes**

**14. Number of parts**

**15. Evaluation of the information** (positive, negative, neutral)

### 5.5. Frequency tables and coding process

Simple and comprehensive frequency tables were created from the analysis of the sample of 150 journalistic items related to the air traffic controllers’ strike, the subsequent declaration of state of emergency and the signing of the disciplinary proceedings. The tables reflected which persons or groups became the governmental sources of information; the presence of air traffic controllers throughout the media as a source of information; and the role played by the political opposition as well as the social networks and consumer associations. In short, these tools were used to evaluate the presence and effectiveness of the different communications policies carried out by the two protagonists of the conflict (the Spanish government and the air traffic controllers) and to evaluate the role and the consequences of the communications policies (positive, negative, neutral) of the air traffic controllers and the government.

## 6. Results

### 6.1. Quantitative results

The communications policy of a political institution that faces a crisis is considered to be successful if: 1) the institution achieves an adequate presence in the media, in quantitative terms, as an active source, and not as a passive subject; and if 2) the direct appearances and indirect references to the institution in the media are as positive as possible or as less damaging as possible.

This section evaluates the first aspect based on the identification of the main sources of information included in the 150 journalistic items (distributed in 167 pages) obtained from *El País*, *El Mundo*, *Abc*, *Público* and *El Correo*.

#### 6.1.1. Governmental sources and political parties

In total, we identified 349 explicitly-identified sources. Of these, 90 were related to the government, and about a third of these (34) corresponded to the Minister of Public Works, José Blanco, who plays a very active and belligerent role in the crisis triggered by the strike of the air traffic controllers.

Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, who is currently José Blanco's ministerial colleague and at that time was the government's spokesperson, the Home Secretary and the Deputy Prime Minister, appears as a source on 15 occasions. The declaration of the state of emergency and the presence of the army to ensure the operation of the air network explain why the Ministry of Defence was quoted on 9 occasions as a source. This ministry is followed by the crisis Cabinet formed by the Executive, whose statements are published on seven occasions; and José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, who plays a secondary role in the crisis and only appears on two occasions as source.

In addition to the Government, the political parties also commented on the air traffic controllers' strike. Their opinions were published in the sample of newspapers on 37 occasions, of which 20 were attributed to spokesmen or leaders of the Popular Party (evenly distributed between the party's leader, parliamentary spokesperson and institutional spokesperson: Mariano Rajoy, Soraya Sáez de Santamaría and Esteban González Pons, respectively) and ten to the PSOE's spokesmen or leaders and other four political parties.

#### 6.1.2. The promoters of the strike: a secondary source

The presence of the air traffic controllers as a direct source may be qualified as secondary. Despite being the instigators and organisers of the strike that caused the crisis and as a consequence the target of criticisms from the Government and the affected people, the voice of the air traffic controllers remained in the background, at least in quantitative terms. The statements of the main representative body of the air traffic controllers, the USCA, were published only in 21 journalistic items.



With regards to the distribution of sources across newspapers, *El País* and *Público* presented the largest number of statements made by the USCA (7 and 6 respectively). In contrast, *Abc* and *El Correo* presented the lowest number of statements made by the USCA (two occasions each). *El Mundo* was in an intermediate position, as it presented the statements of the USCA in four occasions.

### **6.1.3. The protagonist role of airport users and other affected sectors**

In the middle of the government that denounced the attitude and actions of the promoters of the strike and the air traffic controllers' defence of their demands and initiatives we the travellers stranded at the airports and the affected companies. The sample of newspapers gave a clear protagonist role to the testimonials of the airport users, who are presented as a source on 75 occasions, nearly one of every four quoted sources.

A significant but lower coverage was given to consumer associations, which were approached by the newspapers which wanted to find out about the rights of travellers in these situations and the process to pursue their claims. In total these associations appeared on 32 occasions. *Público*, *El País* and *El Correo* were the newspapers that gave greater coverage to consumer associations (with 9, 8 and 7 inclusions as sources, respectively). In contrast, consumer associations are cited only on three occasions by *Abc* and on five by *El Mundo*. In this category of sources, the Cremades & Calvo-Sotelo law firm acquired a protagonist role as it defended the affected users and helped them to obtain a compensation of €10,000 per passenger.

The statements made by the associations and organisations related to the tourism sector, one of the main victims of the economic impact of the strike on the Constitution Day holiday, were presented in 15 editorial pieces.

The growing protagonist role of the social networks was also reflected in the coverage of the sample of newspapers. The comments about the strike posted on Facebook and Twitter were quoted used in 12 journalistic items. The comments made in the social networks were used as a source on three occasions in *El País*, *El Correo* and *Abc*, on two occasions in *El Mundo* and on one occasion in *Público*.

## **6.2. Qualitative results**

The quantitative analysis was complemented with a qualitative analysis of the sample of newspapers. This analysis took into consideration keywords in headings and summary leads, the weight and sense of the newspapers' opinion pieces, and the images included in the journalistic items.

### **6.2.1. Titling elements and assessment of the strike**

This study has focused on the keywords used by the sample of newspapers to present the events related to the strike, particularly in the titling elements (title, subtitle, nut graphs and pull quotes) and

summary leads of the 150 units of analysis (news report, chronological report, feature article, interview, editorial, op-ed).

The assessment of the strike is based on the analysis of the keywords included in the headings, subtitles, summary leads and pull quotes. In this analysis the journalistic items considered as negatives are those in which insults occupy a prominent place and the conflict is described as "wildcat strike", "chaos", "job abandonment", "irresponsibility", "outrage", "the abusive salary of air traffic controllers", "blackmail", "the conflict's shameful image beyond Spain", "the high economic cost of the strike" or "serious disobedience". Positive journalistic items are those which include in their most important parts such terms as "solution to the crisis", "normality" and "the battle was won". Finally, the journalistic items considered as neutral are those which show an unclear position towards the case, for instance, "The Reagan case is similar to the Spanish one" and "Aena asks people to calm down".

The analysis shows an overwhelming predominance of negative terms and concepts about the suitability, causes and consequences of the strike promoted by the air traffic controllers. The three most common words in the analysed headlines are, in this order, "blackmail" (26 inclusions), "chaos" (24), "outrage" (23). The appearance of the term "blackmail" in one of every five headlines confirms the newspapers' disapproval of the actions of the air traffic controllers. The frequency of the word "outrage" highlights and feeds back the social reaction towards the promoters of the strike, but not towards the Spanish government, which is presented as a victim and not as responsible for the strike. The intense use of the term "chaos" to describe the situation created by the air traffic controllers' strike, added to its perception as a "blackmail", and the resulting social "outrage", contribute to the perception of the air traffic controllers as the main responsible and prevent the possible claims and accusations against the government.

The following most common words and concepts delve into the aforementioned description of the strike by the newspapers. The fourth most-common concept in the headlines, "wildcat strike" (with 17 inclusions) includes a strong qualifying adjective that connotes viciousness and cruelty on the part of the promoters of the strike. Along this line are the words "threats" (16 inclusions) and "irresponsibility" (14 inclusions).

In total, 87 (about 60%) of the sample of 150 journalistic items describe the strike negatively. Only five of the 150 journalistic items described the strike positively, with terms and phrases such as "the solution to the crisis", "normality" and "the battle was won". The rest of the journalistic items (58) were classified as neutral, as they showed an ambiguous position towards the strike. Examples of these journalistic items are "The Reagan case, a precedent in the history of the United States". These proportions are very similar across the sample of the newspapers.

What about the Government? In this context, which according to the newspapers' headlines has generated so many inconveniences and trouble to hundreds of thousands of airport users, the Spanish government, the ultimate institution responsible for air traffic control in the country, occupies a delicate position. However, and it has been shown, the general discourse of the newspapers'

coverage put the blame on the air traffic controllers. In addition, the following most common terms described a government that responds decisively and without hesitation to the actions of the air traffic controllers. This is confirmed by the repeated inclusion of the terms "militarisation" (included 16 times) and "disciplinary proceedings" (12 inclusions in headlines). On the other hand, the words and expressions that may be harmful to the image on the performance of the Executive are very rare. "Lack of authority" appears only in three headlines, "poor working conditions of air traffic controllers" in four, and "rights of air traffic controllers" in two.

### **6.2.2. The weight of the opinion section**

The negative perception of the attitude of the air traffic controllers, the reasons for their mobilisation and the consequences of the strike, is reinforced by the assessments made by the opinion sections the newspapers (editorials, opinion articles and, to a lesser extent, readers' opinions), which constituted almost one third of the sample of journalistic items. To be precise, in the four-day period under analysis, the sample of newspapers published 31 opinion articles, 9 editorials and 4 letters to the editor, in comparison to four photographic reportages, 27 news reports, 22 feature articles, and 33 chronological reports.

The editorials also reflected the success of the communications policy implemented by the Spanish government and the failure of the strategy designed by the air traffic controllers. Thus, *Abc*, a newspaper characterised by its little complacency with the Socialist government, points out in one of its editorials that "the air traffic controllers are the only ones to blame for what happened this weekend". On 6 December this paper argues that "the air traffic controllers have no right to convert their abuse in a custom and their profession into a weapon to hold citizens for ransom (...). The indignation of the hundreds of thousands of citizens stranded in airports and treated as the hostages of a labour dispute, of which they are not part, is fair and logical. A wildcat strike is an unacceptable and inappropriate attitude among qualified professionals". In line with this idea, the letters to the director published on this matter by the conservative newspaper support the same thesis: the air traffic controllers are the ones to blame.

In *El Mundo*, also characterised by a belligerent editorial line towards the government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, its Deputy Director, Victoria Prego wrote that "The response to civil crimes of this nature had to be planned and tested since long time ago. It is now when the government has faced and put in the right path to this group of blackmailers. Previous leaders only gave up to the demands and we all know the results".

*El Correo*, which belongs to the same corporate group as *Abc*, is also certain where to put the blame. "The group that has made the blunder of fully confronting the state must pay a very high price for its stubborn audacity. (...) The reform is urgently needed because if it does not take place we will continue at the mercy of a few professionals, whose statements have called into question even their personal psychological stability".

### **6.2.3. Images. Reinforcing the negative depiction**

The more or less explicit assessment of the titling elements is reinforced with the graphic elements of the journalistic pieces. The content of the images that illustrate and enrich the text, both in the front and interior pages, stresses the essential facts and the most relevant theses proposed by the journalistic items.

In the case of the photographic coverage of the air traffic controllers' strike and its consequences, the harmony between words and images is constant. As it was the case with the textual elements, although to a lesser extent, the majority of the pictures included by the sample of journalistic items also opposed the actions of the air traffic controllers.

In fact, 74 (56%) of the 132 images included in the sample reinforced the "outrage", "chaos" and the "blackmail" described by the headlines. Photographers captured the reaction of the travellers stranded in the Spanish airports, which range from surprise, boredom, fatigue, exasperation and anger. Most journalistic items include images of groups of travellers complaining at the desks of Aena and the airlines, and of the citizens who protest, complain and, even, go to the place where the air traffic controllers gathered to reproach their attitude. In all the pictures, the negative criticism towards the promoters of the strike is clear.

This analysis classified as neutral images those showing the airports' information screens showing the cancelled flights. Of the 132 images, 24 (about 20%) included this reference. The 18 graphics included in the sample of journalistic items were also classified as neutral. The images of the main protagonists of the conflict were also considered neutral: the Spanish government, mainly its Minister of Public Works, José Blanco, and the representatives of the air traffic controllers. Although the image of these protagonists can be classified as neutral, their angles and gestures, as well as the number of occurrences are not. Thus, while José Blanco appeared in eight pictures in the sample of journalistic items, the air traffic controllers only appeared in two pictures, despite the fact that they are constantly referred to in the journalistic items. The leader of the main opposition party, Mariano Rajoy, appears in four images.

### **6.3. The protagonist role of the social networks and the Internet in the strike**

Faced with a strong social opposition to their actions and messages, the air traffic controllers decided to communicate from the outset via social networks, primarily Facebook and Twitter, a media space where they can communicate freely. However, while using the social networks the air traffic controllers did not take into account that newspapers were permanently monitoring their comments, which were unfortunate on numerous occasions, and using them as sources and even quoting them in their news stories' titles and lead summaries. This is one of the most commented: "There are not enough of us air traffic controllers, and this is what it is. We are not enough to handle the work, Fuck! You people want to bury us. You demand us to work every day so you can enjoy your fucking holidays and what about our fucking holidays".

Social networks, online forums and blogs appeared as the sources published by the printed media on 12 occasions, which may seem residual data but they are used in the nut graphs and pull quotes of 10 journalistic items. Interestingly, one of the photographs used to illustrate the criminal consequences of the air traffic controllers' strike is a picture of Facebook.

Therefore, the two sides of the conflict are in this social network: the air traffic controllers through their spokesperson, Zemit, and the article "Do not control" of the blog [bloguionistas.wordpress](http://bloguionistas.wordpress.com), one of the most popular on the Internet. In this post, a female air traffic controller from Palma de Mallorca, Cristina Anton, explains the situation of this group of professionals and some of their demands and attacks the government, Aena and the coverage of the media. The air traffic controller also sends a very clear message to the passengers: "I defend the last right I have, which is the right to fight to recover my rights, what you call privileges (which is ridiculous), and my professional and personal dignity".

Faced with the silence of the representatives of the collective, other air traffic controllers also used Internet to respond to the criticisms, in this case through their professional blog, titled "Controladores aéreos y otras hierbas" ("Air traffic controllers and other herbs"). Along this line, the group "for the truth about the conflict of the Spanish air traffic controllers" complained that this collective works 28 days a month, with no maternity leave, with arbitrary and sudden work shifts, with more overtime than the permitted by law and forced to work 1,670 hours a year regardless of the possible casualties.

On the other hand, Twitter, the main microblogging social network main, channelled much of the public outrage. Twitter users learned before anyone else of the outbreak of the crisis and its development, which led them to post thousands of comments (tweets), most of them very critical towards the air traffic controllers and many of them in a humorous tone. The airport chaos became one the 6 most popular trending topics in the world on December 4.

#### **6.4. Characteristics of the communications policy implemented by the government**

This section will describe the different proactive and reactive actions carried out by the Spanish government to deal with the strike, the messages disseminated through the media in order to reach the target audience, and the most relevant data about the specificities of these communications policies.

1. Leadership in the media. As mentioned, the number of statements included in the sample of journalistic items is 349. Of them, 90 were made by representatives of the Spanish government against 21 made by the air traffic controllers. These data reveal that the government implemented more communications actions and that it opted for proactive communication strategies. The external communication with the media was included among the objectives of the institution responsible for managing this crisis.

2. Selection of spokespersons. The person leading the management of the crisis among the external media is the Minister of Public Works, José Blanco. In contrast, the participation of the Prime Minister in this crisis is residual, and he only appears at the end to announce that airports return to normal activities. This decision is not accidental and its objective is clear: to reach citizens through a person with a good reputation, i.e. someone who had not been linked to significant negative aspects. Zapatero was not chosen as spokesperson to the media due to the economic crisis and his very low level of popularity. When questioned by journalists about the absence of the Spanish Prime Minister, the rest of the members of the Cabinet crisis responded to the he would explain the crisis management to the Congress.

3. Selling an image of control. The first action taken by the spokesperson of the crisis management to the public, the Minister of Public Works, was a press conference held at 20:40 PM on Friday, 3 December, in which he transmitted a short, direct and human message. He apologised to the travellers (about 250,000) affected by the "blackmail" of the air traffic controllers who were using travellers as "hostages". This is the first time that the Spanish society receives an official explanation of the problem, accompanied by an apology from the Government which exonerates itself from the conflict. With this proactive action the government leads from the first moment the pre-crisis situation.

However, this speech had already been spoken, almost a year before, on 19 January, in Congress. That speech started with a devastating message: "some air traffic controllers earn up to €900,000 euros a year. Of those earnings €200,000 are the base salary and about €700,000 are overtime". This was the first strategic communication action of the government to face the possible crisis that the air traffic controllers could provoke. With that speech, which was clear and direct, the government achieve its main objective: to turn the public opinion against the air traffic controllers.

In the conference Blanco also made clear its commitment to implement work systems (the AFIS system) to be able to operate the air traffic without the air traffic controllers. This message played down the significance of the activity developed by the collective. The less indispensable a profession is the less likely people will accept their high salary. This lead the population, as reflected in the media, to think: "So in addition to charging a lot of money, they are not needed?"

Blanco ended the conference with the following words: "It does not matter what management model we propose, if we do not solve the air navigation problem any model will be unsustainable". In this way, Blanco linked his objective of ending with the privileges of the air traffic controllers to a higher objective that has more political and social support.

4. Controlled appearances in the media. Press conferences, official press releases and websites were used by the government to implement its communication actions. The willingness of the Executive to answer questions about this situation of tension and disorder made journalists to try to provide rich news coverage. These attitudes characterise the implementation of a proactive communications policy.

5. Design and dissemination of messages. Messages were short and selective (not more than two ideas were transmitted per press conference), avoided the use of strong words that could cause a conflict, such as militarisation. On 3 December, the Minister of Public Works announced that at 21:30 he would put into force measures to ensure the air navigation service. However, he did not explicitly say that he was referring to the militarisation of the air traffic control that the Spanish Prime Minister approved to start at 22:45.

Another action that provoked many headlines and comments was an unprecedented action in the Spanish democracy: the Declaration of the state of emergency by the Council of Ministers. In this case, the Prime Minister delegated the responsibility to appear before the public to the Deputy Prime Minister and Home Secretary, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba. This measure and the previous decision to militarise the airspace were aimed at a specific audience: the air traffic controllers, and not so much the citizens, who since hours before were already supporting the Executive. This proactive communication did not only allow the Government to be source of 90% of the news coverage of this crisis, but also solved some problems. In less than two hours after the Royal Decree of state of emergency was published the air traffic controllers returned to their jobs.

The coherence of the discourse is another of the characteristics of the messages issued by the Spanish government. Whenever the different representatives of the government made some kind of statement, they included an apology on behalf of the government and assured the people that there would be consequences. The most common phrases in the statements were "Disciplinary proceedings have been opened"; "the public prosecutors' office is acting", "they will have to respond for their actions", and "it is time to do justice".

Finally, the bluntness of the message was crucial to place each protagonist of the conflict on the desired side. The Government positions itself in the side of the "good" guys with the following two statements:

- José Blanco: "we will not accept this blackmail that is using citizens as hostages".
- Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba: "The objective is to turn the air traffic controller into a worker that is paid by the state but does not periodically threaten citizens to defend its privileges. And this is just an episode of a war whose objective is to dismantle the privileges of these gentlemen named air traffic controllers".

The analysis of all the statements made by the members of the government, as official sources, indicates that the construction of the message was crucial from the outset to the development of a communications policy, which was characterised for the promotion of story with a beginning, a conflict and an end. In addition to opting for a proactive strategy to communicate with the public, the government used the storytelling technique, based on the great fictional stories with good and bad, strong and weak characters. These techniques are used to make the public perceive the actors involved in the crisis as protagonists and antagonists, through the creation of the aforementioned

stereotypes (air traffic controllers are privileged, insensitive and selfish workers) and the use of archetypes that make it easier to anticipate and understand the decisions taken by the government.

### **6.5. Characteristics of the communications policy implemented by the air traffic controllers**

1. Improvisation and lack of coherence in their actions and communications. The Air Traffic Controllers Union, USCA, only held one press conference on Friday, 3 December at 5:00 PM in Madrid. In this conference, the USCA rejected the Decree of the Spanish government but did not specify whether there would be any demonstrations. In fact, its President, Camilo Cela and his spokesmen, Daniel Zámit and César Cabo, affirmed that no strike had been planned. At the same time, the air traffic controllers had already abandoned their jobs alleging that they were suffering from stress-related problems to mask a covert strike. The lack of coordination between the spokesmen of the USCA and the air traffic controllers contributed to the negative perception of this sector and instead of contributing to improve their image and reverse the situation, it damaged it even more. This communicative action is proactive but is not part of a comprehensive action plan and has deficiencies in the internal and external dimensions of communication. There is no unified discourse to represent all of the air traffic controllers. A clear example of this are the following statements issued by the air traffic controllers: "we are not in a wildcat strike, but people are acting crazy", "At this time this is an ungovernable collective", "People has lost their minds", "We ask passengers to try to understand us".

2. Selection of spokespersons. In the first hours after the strike broke out, the conflict and the subsequent chaos, there were three voices representing the air traffic controllers: Zámit, the communications officer of the USCA, Cabo and Cela (the President of USCA). The message they transmitted was: air traffic controllers got sick and tired of the inability of the government to attend their continuous request for help to solve the violation of their annual working hours limit. The message prepared by these three persons focuses on making clear their demands and criticisms towards the government, which were orderly and respectfully presented. However, these features are lacking in the personal emails released by individual air traffic controllers, who do not respect the communicational hierarchy of the organisation. The absence of an internal and external communications plan made air traffic controllers to issue messages filled with anger, desperation and insults, which accelerates the deterioration of their image in the media.

There are, therefore, two actions that are not recommended in crisis management: naming more than one spokesperson and allowing disorder in the construction and origin of the message. The main problem is that any air traffic controller could act as a spokesperson through the social networks and in front of journalists. The damage of these personal actions in the image of their organisation, which has a communications department, is as serious as irreversible. Any explanation offered by the air traffic controllers was useless and only worsened their negative social perception. Their statements were reactive communications that responded to the accusations made by opinion leaders which qualified them as a privileged sector that was being "unrealistic" to demand 250 hours less of work while maintaining their high salaries in the midst of an economic crisis.

3. Lies. The information included in the statements and actions of the air traffic controllers is filled up with lies. While the USCA explains that the air traffic controllers are sick, newspapers publish images showing the air traffic controllers having drinks together in a hotel. In a crisis, the public opinion, particularly in this case in which the public opinion is largely formed by the affected



persons and those who sympathise with them, may tolerate mistakes but never a lie. The use of lies is a communicative strategy destined to fail and to face social rejection.

4. Communication without a clear objective. A sector that was forcing more than half a million people to spend whole days in an airport had the courage to intensify the conflict with the following statements: "I am in no conditions to work and based on article 34 of the aviation safety law nobody should work like this", "Air traffic controllers have been objects of another provocation in the form of a Royal Decree Law".

5. Strategy of silence. After the conference held on Friday, the air traffic controllers and their Union chose Facebook as the channel to transmit their opinions. They do answer the calls of journalists, do not organise press conferences nor issue press releases. Worsening their negative image, as a disorganised group, the coldness with which the air traffic controllers expressed themselves depicted them as shameless: "the collective is not the source of the problem. The problem is the conditions of slavery in which they carry on their work". The second day of the crisis the Spanish society was not only against the demands of this sector but, as reflected in the editorials and opinion articles, also put it in their list their of the most hated groups.

6. The apology strategy. Although it was already late, on Monday, 6 December, after the silence strategy, Zamit apologised on behalf of the Union, through his Facebook page, where he posted the following message: "We are responsible for the chaos". "We want the airports to get back to normal as soon as the air traffic controllers get back to work". Other air traffic controllers, like Merche Canalejo, strongly apologised to citizens. "We did not want this to happen". This was a reactive communication strategy which in this cases have an enormous positive effect, but it was too little and too late. As a result, the public opinion, which values honesty and strongly disapproves mistakes, socially condemned the air traffic controllers for being irresponsible.

7. Strategy of transfer of responsibilities. The air traffic controllers' acceptance of responsibility and the apologies offered for the harm caused, were followed by the strategy of blaming a third party of the conflict, in this case the Spanish government. However, this strategy, which can be effective on the short term and is used in many organisations to win time, failed to achieve the recognition of the public opinion, who saw this strategy as a lack of respect, not so much due to the circumstances but due to the form.

## **7. Conclusions**

1. The communications policy designed by the Spanish government to face the air traffic controllers' strike that took place on 3, 4, 5 and 6 December 2010 was part of an effective comprehensive communication strategy that was already prepared for this kind of crisis. Proactivity characterised all the communicative interventions and actions carried out by those responsible for solving the conflict, in contrast to the lack of a communications plan among those who were the protagonists of the strike, the air traffic controllers. The success of the strategy developed by the government is based on the combination of strong arguments and emotions that that managed to persuade the public opinion. From the outset, this strategy put the protagonists of the conflict in two distinct categories: the Government as the defender of the citizens and the air traffic controllers as the bad guys who used passengers as hostages.

In this kind of conflicts, in which the crisis damages hundreds of thousands of citizens, the use of the storytelling technique in the proactive communications policy is very effective. The government

built its vision of reality as if it were a story, with a beginning, a conflict and an ending, and clearly defined protagonists and antagonists, the good and the bad guys, the victim and the tormentor. Moreover, this technique allows crisis managers to sort out the information that reaches the different audiences, to give them meaning and to isolate the noise and the possible communication interferences.

2. The sample of newspapers internalised and adopted the terms with which the government described the air traffic controllers and their actions. Terms such as covert strike, wildcat strike, privileged sector, indignation and blackmail predominated in the media. Their constant use, with and without quotation marks, was crucial to worsen the negative public perception of the attitude and actions of the Air Traffic Controllers Union, USCA. The success of the government's communications policy lies in the fact that its interpretation of reality ends up being adopted by the media.

3. The disorder of the messages released by the air traffic controllers, with no control of the timing or the protagonists, revealed the lack of a communications policy focused on informing society about the reasons behind their actions. Silence, refutation of responsibilities in the conflict, and use of lies are the wrong strategies to use in this type of situations since they only put the media and the public opinion against them. Although the starting point of the air traffic controllers, from the perspective of communication, is already complex (a small group of workers with very high salaries and a great power of influence over hundreds of thousands of users), the absence of an appropriate communications strategy only accentuate the weakness of their position in the eyes of the public opinion. Their actions constituted what can be termed as a "communicative suicide".

4. The new technologies have a protagonist role in this kind of crises, insofar as they contribute to the generation of opinions among the different publics and accentuate the problem. However, the new communication technologies are not effective tools to prevent and put an end to the crisis, which contradicts one of the hypotheses of this study: that their use is crucial for the development of a proactive communication strategy. In the case under analysis, the social networks play an important role in because they are the means of communication chosen by the air traffic controllers to disseminate their messages, but not based on a previously-established criteria or strategy, and so their effects end up being contrary to their interests.

5. In a conflict of such magnitude, with hundreds of thousands of affected people, the role of consumer associations as allies of the affected and uninformed airport users was minimal. The intervention of the associations like OCU (Consumers and Users Association), FACUA (Consumers in Action Association) and CECU (Consumers and Users Council) was minimal. These organisations did not design any specific action focused on providing information on how to recover the money of the cancelled plane tickets, how to fill a complaint or how to sue the air traffic controllers. They maintained a reactive communicative policy limited to respond the questions of the journalists and this only happened during the first two days of the crisis. The participation of the consumer organisations was so minimal that the leading role in the defence of the affected airport users was played by a law firm, Cremades & Calvo-Sotelo, which used a proactive strategy and pledged to obtain 10,000 euros in compensation for moral damage for each passenger who decided to fill a lawsuit. The research has refuted the fourth hypothesis of the study, as the role of the consumer organisations was very far from being protagonist.

## 8. List of references

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