

Corporate crisis management

Managing Covid-19 in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden

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Abstract

This chapter presents main challenges to the field of corporate crisis management and crisis communication, as well as to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) during the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite variations in state strategies for dealing with Covid-19, conditions and ways of handling the crisis of the SMEs appear to be quite similar in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, lending confirmation to the idea of a specific Nordic model. As SMEs were not prepared for this type of crisis, many of them turned to their trade associations for help in dealing with the problems created by the pandemic (lockdown, no income, lay-offs, etc.). Hence, based on a small explorative study, we also discuss in this chapter the role and communication of the trade associations in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, acting as intermediaries between companies, government, media, and the public in the rhetorical arena of the Covid-19 pandemic. The trade associations succeeded in increasing the media coverage of SMEs, which had an important impact on solutions such as state support packages and the communication with members (extra-communication) and staff despite lockdown and remote work.

Keywords: corporate crisis management, internal crisis communication, SME resilience, trade associations, Covid-19, extra-communication

Introduction

When a community falls victim to an epidemic or a pandemic, different types of social actors or stakeholders contribute to the construction of what Andrew Lakoff (2019) names an “epidemic emergency”. This has also been the case in

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relation to Covid-19 in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, since the beginning of 2020. Focus has traditionally been on 1) the citizens who live in countries affected by epidemics or pandemics, 2) public authorities (such as health authorities and the police) who control a good part of the restrictions, including the use of facemasks, 3) politicians and political parties who form the governments, 4) experts, 5) activists, and 6) the news media.

However, corporations are also victims of a pandemic. In fact, one of the interesting characteristics of the Covid-19 pandemic is the highly active role played by corporations, their leaders, and employees – as well as by trade associations – from the beginning. Although Covid-19 has not been harmful to all companies, many have been severely affected by the lockdown or restrictions introduced by the governments and health authorities in the Nordics. In particular, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have had difficulties in surviving the consequences of long-term lockdowns, or in having an impact on the governmental decisions during the pandemic. For that reason, many of them turned to their trade associations for help. Thus, the important role played by the trade associations is another interesting characteristic of the pandemic.

Trade associations are also known as metaorganisations, or the “organizations of organizations” (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). During the Covid-19 pandemic, they acted as crisis communicators in the media and as public affairs officers on behalf of their members. Trade associations, as well as unions, have played an active role in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Hence, the corporatist tradition and the specific Nordic model (welfare state, economic policy, and organised work life) has influenced the handling of the pandemic (Ihlen et al., 2022; Fløtten & Trygstad, 2020).

The aim of this chapter is to study corporate crisis management and crisis communication in the Scandinavian countries during Covid-19 and to discuss the following three research questions:

- RQ1. What have been the main challenges to corporate crisis management and crisis communication during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- RQ2. How have corporations (in particular, SMEs) in the Scandinavian countries handled Covid-19?
- RQ3. What has been the role of the trade associations in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden communicating on behalf of an industry and acting as intermediaries between companies, government, media, and the public during the Covid-19 pandemic?

First, we briefly present a crisis management framework that takes the interdependencies between public crisis management, political crisis management, and corporate crisis management during the Covid-19 pandemic into account.

This is done to discuss the role of corporate crisis management in the overall field of crisis management. During the pandemic, corporations have had to navigate between restrictions from health authorities, political decisions from government (e.g., lockdowns), and the (financial) survival of their business, making it a very complex situation.

Next, we present the specific challenges to the field of corporate crisis management and crisis communication of corporations created by the Covid-19 pandemic in the Scandinavian countries. This includes a brief discussion of crisis types and dynamics; anticipation and resilience; and external and internal crisis communication, followed by a short presentation of SME strategies for coping with the crisis.

Finally, we present the results of a small explorative study based on statements and semi-structured interviews with chief communication officers of four trade associations within the hospitality industry that has been severely affected by Covid-19 (Breier et al., 2021): HORESTA (www.horesta.dk) and SMVdanmark (www.smvdanmark.dk) in Denmark; NHO (www.nho.no) in Norway; and Visita (www.visita.se) in Sweden. These interviews were conducted in late 2021, and referred to as TA1, TA2, TA3, and TA4, respectively, when quoted in this chapter. We discuss the key challenges of SMEs as perceived by the trade associations, as well as the role and communication of the four trade associations speaking on behalf of the industry and acting as intermediaries (Frandsen & Johansen, 2015) between companies, government, media, and the public in the rhetorical arena of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The role of corporate crisis management in an overall framework

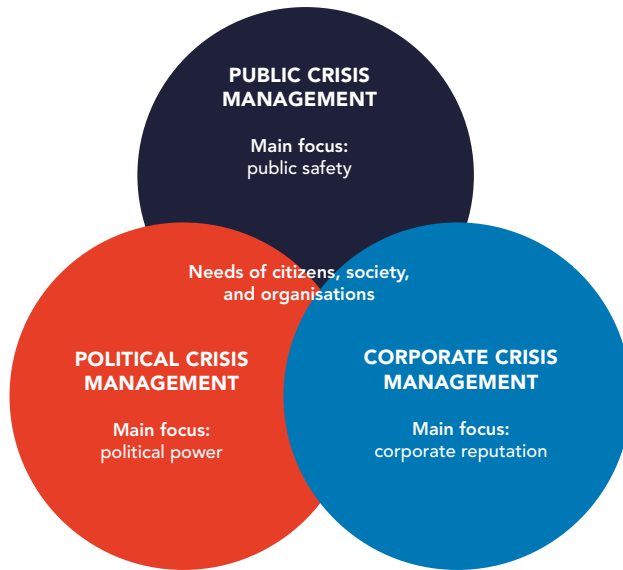
Instead of considering crisis management as one big, unified field of study, or as many small disciplines able to represent the whole, we argue that the field of crisis management and crisis communication can be reframed into three subfields.

Three subfields of crisis management

We propose a new model according to which there exists three interrelated subfields within crisis management: 1) public crisis management, 2) political crisis management, and 3) corporate crisis management. Instead of public crisis management, we sometimes talk about emergency management or disaster management. By subfield, we understand “a set of more or less institutionalized policies, programs, and practices that are connected to a specific sector of society defined as an interinstitutional system” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020b:

61). In our work, we have been inspired by the institutional logics' perspective (Thornton et al., 2012).

Figure 8.1 *Three interrelated subfields within crisis management*



Source: Adapted from Frandsen & Johansen, 2020b: 61

As it appears from Figure 8.1, the three subfields are interrelated and interdependent of one another during crises. They are governed by specific institutional logics built around a series of crisis-related tasks that are taken in charge by specific key actors and organisations in specific sectors. All three subfields have an overall goal of handling crises for the sake of citizens, society, and organisations, and are actively dealing with the crisis stage. However, they differ in relation to main focus and they can be said to pay more attention to a specific stage in the life cycle of a crisis compared with the other subfields.

Public crisis management typically has a focus on public safety and on the crisis stage: Emergency is about reacting once a crisis hits, and about risk and crisis communication to reduce risk and harm to citizens (Seeger et al., 2020). Political crisis management has a focus on political power and on the post-crisis stage: Managing a crisis is also about maintaining or gaining power once a crisis is over. Blame games (Hood, 2011), framing contests, and crisis exploitation (Boin et al., 2009, 2017) – as well as official commissions of inquiries (Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2010) – are typically part of the post-crisis stage. Finally, corporate crisis management has a focus on corporate reputation and on the

pre-crisis stage: how to avoid crises and manage reputation. In this chapter, we concentrate on the corporations (for elaboration of the two first subfields, see Frandsen & Johansen, 2020b).

Covid-19 and the relations among crisis management subfields

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the public, political, and corporate crisis management subfields clearly interacted and were mutually interdependent on one another. On the one hand, corporations must navigate between a health crisis (following the restrictions and instructions of the health authorities and the government) and a business crisis (due to the consequences of the public and political handling of the health crisis). The business crisis, for some organisations, involves lockdown, business disruption, lay-offs, and the risk of business collapse following the rules and regulations of the government. On the other hand, society is dependent on business and organisations (e.g., for the economy) and on the well-being of citizens and the workforce. This means that the government must also listen to and assist companies in surviving the crisis, for instance, by creating a financial instrument, such as support or compensation packages, introduced early in the crisis in all three Scandinavian countries. Government and authorities must also listen to the intermediaries (e.g., trade associations and trade unions) because they can inform them about the situation and needs of their members. In fact, employer associations in some cases played a very important role for governmental decisions. Consider, for instance, the impact that Norwegian employer organisations had on the governmental decision to make an exception to the rules of quarantine and open the borders for immigrant workers to Norway – a decision that had large consequences for the second wave of Covid-19 in Norway (Røed-Johansen et al., 2020). Although public crisis management and political crisis management were the most visible fields during the Covid-19 pandemic, corporate crisis management also played an important role.

Sweden decided not to impose a lockdown in early 2020, in contrast to Denmark and Norway, but citizens decided, voluntarily, to maintain social distance and work from home. According to the chief communication officer at the Swedish trade association, Visita, which represents the Swedish hospitality industry,

there has been a lot of discussion about the Swedish Covid-19 strategy, and formally, there was a difference between us and Norway or Denmark, but practically, it was not that big of a difference, because there were a lot of recommendations, advice, and so on. It was very clear that they did not want people to travel, or see each other, or go to restaurants, etcetera. We have been fighting for letting people know that even though we did not have a formal lockdown, it was a kind of lockdown anyway. (TA4)

As it appears above, despite variations in strategies and in interactions between health authorities and governments in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, corporations – including SMEs – experienced the same kind of consequences to their businesses: lockdown, lay-offs, remote work, income problems, and clients staying away.

Challenges to corporate crisis management and crisis communication

Corporate crisis management has a focus on the reputation (and survival) of the organisation and on how to avoid crisis (the pre-crisis stage), applying a strategic, proactive, process-oriented approach to management (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Key actors are private and public organisations as well as intermediaries, such as industry and trade associations representing company members and unions representing the workforce.

The life cycle approach, or staged approach (before, during, and after a crisis) (Coombs, 2019; Fink, 1986/2000; Mitroff, 1994), is a predominant approach within the field when working in practice with crisis management. It includes the pre-crisis stage (signal detection and preventing and preparing for crisis); the crisis stage (recognition, containment, and recovery); and the post-crisis stage (evaluation, institutional memory – or learning – and post-crisis actions) (Coombs, 2019). Such a life-cycle approach is based on an understanding of a crisis as being linear and sequential; however, this is not necessarily the case. The business consequences of Covid-19 do not necessarily constitute a crisis for all companies simultaneously or to the same extent, and tools such as risk, issues, and stakeholder management – or learning and change communication – do not only play out in the pre-crisis stage or in the post-crisis stage, but during *all* stages (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Jaques, 2014).

Anticipation and resilience are key dimensions within crisis management. Although, a narrowly planned, prescriptive approach to crisis management still plays an important role for anticipating crises, a newer and broader approach combining a planned and an emergent approach to crisis management has gained traction (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). In an emergent approach to crisis management, focus is on a plan B, and on what to do when plan A fails. This includes dimensions such as contingency, improvisation, situational diagnosis, and resilience. As almost no companies or governments had anticipated the pandemic and its consequences, an emergent approach to Covid-19 was important, including a need for improvisation (Roux-Dufort & Vidaillet, 2003) and resilience, defined as “the capacity to withstand unanticipated dangers after they have become manifest, learning to bounce back” (Wildavsky, 1988: 17).

Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has turned out to be a long-term crisis. We have been witnessing second and third waves of the Covid-19 pandemic,

“corona fatigue”, as well as disagreements among health experts, politicians, and organisations for or against specific strategies (e.g., face masks or vaccination; lockdown or reopening; remote work or not). Decisions and communication strategies have been changed several times as we learned from the crisis, and organisations have had to adapt their crisis management strategies accordingly along the way.

Corporate crisis communication during the Covid-19 pandemic

Crisis communication within corporate crisis management has a focus on crisis response strategies, as in Image Repair Theory (Benoit, 2015) or Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2019). However, today, the field also includes a complexity approach, focusing on communicative complexity and multiple and dynamic voices. Rhetorical Arena Theory (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017, 2020a) represents such a multivocal approach to crisis communication. We argue that communication during a crisis takes place not only between an organisation (public, political, or corporate) and its stakeholders, but between multiple voices that interact with one another and communicate *to*, *with*, *against*, *past*, or *about* each other in the rhetorical arena that opens when a crisis breaks out. Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT) is an agonistic model, and not all voices are looking for dialogue and consensus.

Covid-19 has affected whole societies. Multiple voices across the three subfields have communicated with different agendas in this arena – not all of them were searching for consensus. Dissensus and polarisation also played out, for example, in vaccination versus anti-vaccination groups. Some voices were more powerful and resourceful than others. Trade associations are more resourceful and have easier access to media compared with, especially, SMEs; however, they still need to navigate among multiple voices that have different agendas and goals. As it appears from the explorative study presented later in this chapter, the communication activities of SMEs and their trade associations form specific patterns of interaction in the Covid-19 crisis arena.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, internal communication in companies was about internal risk, change, and crisis communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011) to deal with the health issues. However, it has also been about crisis communication related to business consequences, such as financial and market issues, restructuring, lay-offs, and human resource issues. Sense-making (Weick, 1995) – how to make sense of what is happening – has been the key for leaders and employees. Lockdown periods and employees working from home create a need for changes of internal communication (content, channels, technology). Furthermore, the long-term crisis has called for new communication strategies to embrace corona fatigue, including a discourse of renewal (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2020) to regain optimism among staff.

Crisis types and crisis dynamics

The Covid-19 pandemic can be characterised as a global crisis, and companies all over the world have been affected. According to the crisis clusters as detailed by Coombs, Covid-19 is a victim crisis. Such a crisis makes stakeholders attribute only a low degree of responsibility to an organisation, compared to, for instance, an accident or a preventable crisis (Coombs, 2019). However, crises are dynamic, and even if the triggering event is external, as in this case, and not caused by the organisation, a victim crisis can lead to other kinds of crises due, for instance, to the handling of the crisis (see the extended crisis portfolio model of Frandsen & Johansen, 2017: 49).

With Covid-19, organisations not only have to deal with the health and safety issues related to the virus, but also with the consequences to their business of the lockdown and closing of the borders applied as an instrument by the Scandinavian governments in March 2020. Two crises at the same time.

Furthermore, if organisations handle the crisis communication or crisis management in an inappropriate or unethical way, they also risk criticism. Do the companies really need to downsize or reduce number of staff? Are they primarily thinking about profit and business? Do they care about the societal problems created by the pandemic? Are they open and honest in their communication? These are some of the questions raised by their stakeholders. Such criticism can turn a victim crisis into a double crisis, defined as “a crisis where a communication crisis overlaps the original crisis in so far as the organisation in crisis is not able to manage the communication processes that should contribute to the handling of the original crisis” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017: 39). If not the whole business, then at least their reputation may be at stake.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, we have witnessed companies making mistakes and acting in ways that could be considered inappropriate, for instance, in relation to receiving financial support (compensation or loans). This has created debates in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden about which companies are most in need of support. During the lockdown period, a large Danish company within the clothing industry, Bestseller, had to apologise for applying for reduction of rent for its boutiques located in city centres. Small boutiques need this kind of support, but it is questionable whether a huge company earning millions does (Jyllands-Posten, 2020). In contrast, we have also met companies behaving as corporate citizens, assisting and offering their help to the public during the Covid-19 pandemic, using the crisis as an opportunity to strengthen their reputation. To illustrate, the Danish supermarket chain Kvickly donated its surplus earned on nonfood-sales to small boutiques struggling to survive during the lockdown (Brieghel, 2021).

When looking at the impact of the Covid-19 crisis, organisations and industries have been affected differently. Klyver and Nielsen (2021b) have

distinguished between three categories of organisations: crisis exploiters (experienced growth); crisis immunes (unaffected); and crisis victims (suffering). In their study of crisis strategies of 350 SMEs in Denmark during the Covid-19 pandemic, Klyver and Nielsen (2021a) found 38 per cent victims, 32 per cent exploiters, and 30 per cent immune.

For some organisations and industries, the crisis has become an opportunity for increasing the market and for creating new solutions and innovation within business; for instance, grocery stores have increased sales and hired more staff (Dansk Industri, 2020). For other sectors, the crisis has meant lockdown, disruptions, and a risk of going out of business. However, once it is over, some organisations can turn back to business with only minor adjustments (e.g., hairdressers and similar professions), whereas for other organisations, core activities are challenged, and they will need new business models to adapt to new behaviours among citizens and customers for long-term survival. This is, for instance, the case of the traveling industry and airline companies. Also, industries in the Nordics who depend on international human resources, or are experiencing international supply chain challenges, may want to rethink risks and vulnerabilities.

SMEs and crisis strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic in Scandinavia

What have been the characteristics of the crisis management of organisations in Scandinavia? Let's take a closer look, especially at the many SMEs that account for up to 99 per cent of companies in the Nordics. SMEs have specific challenges compared with bigger companies during the pandemic.

How prepared are the organisations for crises?

According to a small explorative study on crisis preparedness of Norwegian SMEs conducted in 2021, 50 out of 87 companies did not have a crisis plan when the Covid-19 pandemic began (Johansen et al., 2022). According to the chief communicator officer of the Danish trade association HORESTA, “some companies have crisis plans but many of the SMEs do not have a plan, or if they have a plan, it does not include pandemics and lockdown” (TA1). This means that the pandemic, causing lockdowns and closing of borders, is a shock to most companies. They must determine how to deal with the crisis and the changes needed overnight. Yet, the most important challenge to the SMEs is of financial nature: no income.

A longitudinal study (entitled Reboot SME) following SMEs in Denmark since the beginning of Covid-19 – early 2020 until January 2022 – presented the first results in December 2020. At that point in time, responses show that

SMEs mostly need a new management strategy that focuses on agility, organisational design, and not least communication to deal with the crisis at this initial stage (Frederiksen & Obel, as cited in Elmann, 2020). Communication is needed with both clients and staff to make “the management strategy more visible and securing transparency of the actual situation, the roles and the new guidelines”, and communication is seen as “decisive for how the customers, the suppliers and the employees react to the situation” (Frederiksen & Obel, as cited in Elmann, 2020: 4). As for the nature of communication, there is a special focus on “the transition from in-person communication to digital and virtual fora”, and SMEs report that they have used “immense energy on online management (Skype, Teams, etc.) and on written communication to all employees” (Frederiksen & Obel, as cited in Elmann, 2020: 4).

In January 2022, Frederiksen and his research team of Reboot SME published new results which demonstrate that companies who have strategies for innovation and for dealing with various future-oriented scenarios are best at dealing with the initial stages of the crisis. Furthermore, having a cost buffer and strategies for diversification of supply chains are also important to being less vulnerable to a crisis such as Covid-19 in the future (Schröder, 2022; Jensen et al., 2021).

How do the SMEs deal with internal crisis management and communication?

As many of the SMEs are forced to have a lockdown, they must send home or lay off staff. They also have to learn about distant leadership, and the specific challenges related to communication and remote work. This includes (online) communication to create cohesion and a sense of belonging, to create safety and comfort, to compensate for the lack of informal and social communication among co-workers, and to create well-being, by mitigating the feeling of isolation, loneliness, and ingroup–outgroup issues (Frandsen & Johansen, 2021).

However, many organisations express that they are quick to adapt to the technological changes needed for this new virtual working day (Johansen et al., 2022). Meetings on Zoom or Microsoft Teams and similar platforms were quickly established. Webinars and an increase in written communication became part of normal and daily internal communication. In fact, the technological update and transformation of many organisations seemed to happen overnight and was considered one of the opportunities and positive learnings from the Covid-19 crisis (Johansen et al., 2022).

What kind of help did the SMEs need? First and foremost, many SMEs were dependent on financial support in the form of support packages or loans to deal with the lack of income. However, SMEs who had no crisis plans themselves, or who needed help in interpreting regulations and rules in applying for state

support, typically contacted their trade association to get legal help. But what kind of help did they get, and how did trade associations in Scandinavia assist their members during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Trade associations as crisis managers for SMEs during the Covid-19 pandemic

Before we have a look at the trade associations' activities during the Covid-19 crisis, let's briefly look into what defines a trade association.

What is a trade association?

Warner and Martin (1967: 314) define trade associations as “non-profit institutions that operate cooperatively for and among competitive, profit-making [actors] within an industry”. Key words are “cooperation” and “competition”. One may therefore ask: What makes competitors engage in collective action? What kind of tasks can trade associations provide solutions to for their members? This is reflected in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (n.d.), where trade associations are defined as,

voluntary associations of business firms organized on a geographic or industrial basis to promote and develop commercial and industrial opportunities within its sphere of operation, to voice publicly the views of members on matters of common interest, or in some cases to exercise some measure of control over prices, output, and channels of distribution.

Internally, trade associations assist their members with information, research, education, certification, and so on, and externally, trade associations act on behalf of their members by, for example, lobbying, public affairs, monitoring policy, and civic practices (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017).

What makes trade associations interesting to study is their complex nature. All trade associations are structured as meta-organisations, or to put it differently, they are “organizations of organizations” (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). The organisation members want to collaborate in a trade association for their common interests, but they are also competitors within the same industry, which may lead to dilemmas or conflicts (Barnett, 2013). Furthermore, as for reputation management, trade associations must take three different levels of reputation into account: 1) the corporate level – that is, the reputation of each individual company; 2) the industry level – that is, the reputation of the industry inside which the member companies operate; and finally, 3) the trade association level – that is, the reputation of the trade association itself (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). The reputation of the trade association itself may have an

impact on the attractiveness to new members compared with a competing trade association or the choice of not being a member. This complexity can make it difficult to navigate during crises (see Frandsen & Johansen, 2015).

When it comes to the crisis preparedness of trade associations and their role and function in situations where one or more (if not all) of their members are experiencing a crisis, we know only a little (Frandsen & Johansen, 2018).

An explorative study on the role of trade associations during the Covid-19 pandemic

In the following section, we present some of the insights from a small explorative study on the role and communication of trade associations in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden in relation to Covid-19 and their way of acting in the rhetorical arena of this global crisis to support their organisational members. We conducted four interviews with the communication directors or vice directors at HORESTA (TA1) and SMVdanmark (TA2) in Denmark, NHO (TA3) in Norway, and Visita (TA4) in Sweden during September–December 2021. The interviews lasted 45–60 minutes and were recorded on Zoom, transcribed, and coded by means of meaning condensation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

We asked the interviewees a series of questions that included how the trade association has dealt with Covid-19 (preparedness, role, communication, stakeholders); how they perceived the reactions, resilience, and handling of Covid-19 by their members; cooperation with other trade associations in the Nordics; and what they have learned from the crisis about themselves, their members, and the needs for communication, counselling, and political influence.

HORESTA (the trade association for Danish hotels and restaurants with 2,000 members) and Visita (the trade association for the Swedish hospitality industry with 5,642 members) mostly have members from within hotels, restaurants, bars, campsites, ski locations, amusement parks, and so on. SMVdanmark (the trade association for small and medium-sized companies in Denmark with 18,000 members) has company members not only from hotels and restaurants but from various SMEs in Denmark. And NHO (the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise, with 29,000 members) represents both SMEs and bigger companies as well as a whole series of industries, and it is organised in 16 sectoral federations, including Food, Drink, Norway; Norwegian Hospitality Association; Norwegian Federation of Service Industries and Retail Trade; and so on.

The level of organisation in trade associations is bigger in Norway and Sweden compared with Denmark. Visita is both an organisation for the industry as well as an employers' association that makes agreements with the unions, and NHO is also part of the collective bargaining and forms the counterpart to LO (the Confederation of Trade Unions in Norway). This double function

probably makes it more attractive to become a member of these trade associations. Let's have a look at the findings.

Crisis preparedness and crisis team

All four trade associations included in our study have crisis plans and are working with crisis scenarios, mostly in relation to crises for their members, but none of them have plans for pandemics or lockdowns. Thus, they all recognise that, post-Covid, they will have to adjust their plans to include lockdown scenarios and “prepare for the most urgent challenges such as internal coordination and anchoring of their crisis strategies to have higher impact on decision-making and to create stronger unity” (TA1).

As for their crisis teams, they met every day at the beginning of the pandemic to coordinate and plan the many activities: helping their members, following the press conferences and changes in restrictions and regulations, making analyses among their members, and providing the press, the government, and public agencies with information about the needs and situation of their members. Thus, they worked day and night and had to restructure their human resources to keep up with the speed.

Roles of the trade associations

As for the *roles* of the trade associations, our study shows that the trade associations have enacted various roles during the Covid-19 pandemic: crisis manager to staff; crisis counsellor to members; supporter of the industry (being visible to members, potential members, and the whole industry); media manager; public affairs manager; and information provider feeding the press and politicians with information to have an impact on solutions and decision-making.

First, the trade associations had to handle Covid-19 internally in its own organisation as a crisis manager. Staff was working from home, and they had to deal with many crisis-related activities.

Next, they had to assist especially the SMEs in direct crisis management as a crisis counsellor. Many of the SMEs did not know what to do to survive the crisis, and for that reason, they turned to the trade associations for advice. The SMEs had a strong need for more information, as rules and restrictions kept changing as the pandemic progressed. They needed to understand how to deal with the health instructions, but more importantly, to obtain legal or audit advice on how to follow procedures and rules for obtaining support packages, compensations, loans, or other kinds of financial support from the state in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. The trade associations were contacted by SMEs who were “desperate or in panic” (TA4) about how to get through the crisis, as they were lacking liquidity and income. For this reason, some trade associations also had to act as psychologists, dealing with strong emotional reactions and asking their members “to calm down” (TA4).

Recognising the need for help probably made some SMEs sign up for membership of a trade association. In fact, all four trade associations experienced a raise in new members during the Covid-19 pandemic, and as one of them stated, “this is probably due to Covid-19 that made especially SMEs recognise the role of the trade association in this crisis and to benefit from our political work” (TA3). NHO gained 1,500 new members, SMVdanmark 1,000, and HORESTA and Visita both reported that they were growing too, although they also lost some organisations that went out of business due to the crisis.

In contrast to the SMEs, large organisations handle crisis management themselves as public affairs managers, but they especially want trade associations to work at the political level – taking on the public affairs role – to have an impact on the decisions of the government on how to support their industry and themselves. The trade associations felt that they were successful in gaining access to the government, to the health agencies, or to the relevant civil servants. The chief communication officer of Visita described it in the following way:

We have a good connection and a lot of contact with the government. That is something that turned out to be one of the things that were positive about the crisis; that the contact of our industries and organisations with the government improved, and now we need to work for that to continue. (TA4)

However, they also stressed that it can be difficult to make it through the political debate and to get on the political agenda if you do not have investigations and statistics to document the needs. And getting access do not necessarily mean that they get all the needs fulfilled of the SMEs and the hospitality industry.

Finally, the trade associations also have a special role to play in making the needs and crisis situations of their members and industries visible to the politicians, the industry, and the public: media manager and information provider. They must be very active in the rhetorical arena. One way of doing this is to increase the external communication in general, and in particular, the communication with the press. The trade associations were all contacted by the media regularly, but to receive even further media attention, all four of them conducted surveys and analyses among their members to continuously offer new insights and overviews of the challenges and needs of their members. In that way, the decision-making of the government and health agencies could be based on latest insights and conversations with the trade associations around possible solutions and support. SMVdanmark (TA2) told us that they have conducted 97 surveys or studies – at least once every week from March 2020 to December 2021 – to continuously be able to feed media and government agencies with updates and numbers. This led to an increase in media coverage of 400 per cent during the Covid-19 crisis, compared with a normal situation. TA4 confirmed this:

We have been presenting our own statistics, numbers, and news almost every day, and brought that to the media. I think we increased our media impact by around 700 percent, and that was not just because of the media calling us, there is a lot of work behind that number. (TA4)

Also, HORESTA (TA1) and NHO (TA3) report that they have succeeded in an important increase in media coverage compared with normal times, as they have been able to feed the press regularly with relevant crisis insights from their members and industry.

Communication of trade associations

As it appeared from above, the roles as crisis counsellor, information provider, public affairs manager, and media manager are centred on communication. The four trade associations have all experienced a serious workload, using “many, many, many man hours” (TA1) to make all of it work, especially as some of their staff – like everybody else – had to work from home. Not only did they deal with external communication, but also with the extra communication (to their members) and internal communication to their staff in new ways due to the lockdown and staff working from home. Two of the trade associations (TA2 & TA3) emphasised that they consider all communication from their trade association to be member communication, because every time they communicate, it is done on behalf of their members:

The way we think is that everything we do is member communication. If my boss is going to appear in the press and talk about an issue, it is key to ask: Is this relevant to our members? Because we are so big in Norway, we have a high visibility and we are being asked about a lot of topics, and we can talk a lot. So, we try to concentrate and use our communication resources on the things that matter to our members. (TA3)

Internally, in the proper organisation of the trade association, it is important to meet daily in the crisis team or group of directors to update, coordinate, and plan for the day. Furthermore, there is a need to include and inform staff working from home. SMVdanmark (TA2) has a strong focus on daily digital meetings and on assuring a one-to-one personal call to each of them daily, to make them feel involved, as remote staff quickly feels disconnected and left out. Thus, internal coordination is important in such situations.

Communication with members can be named *extra-communication*, and it can be defined as “the communication activities taking place inside a group of organisations (a meta-organisation), to which outsiders do not have access” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2015: 265). All four trade associations had to develop new channels for their extra-communication, for several reasons: to keep up

with the need for new information and the speed of updates following every press conference and every new rule or procedure being launched in relation to financial public support; to shift for digital channels as businesses were locked down, and people sent home; and to deal with the immediate problems and worries of their members.

One organisation put up a “corona hotline” and wanted to become the “one-stop place” for their members to get answers to their needs (TA1). Traditional and “slow-moving” newsletters were transformed into “quick news” (newsletters sent out by e-mail immediately once new information is available), and Zoom meetings and webinars were used as a strong alternative to reach across the whole country. NHO (TA3) conducted webinars, sometimes reaching 2,000 participants from all over Norway, corresponding to almost 10 per cent of their members in just one session. Finally, the trade associations also facilitated Facebook groups and social digital networks of, for instance, 10–20 companies, such as “restaurant-clubs” (TA4). Although they were slow at the beginning of the pandemic in embracing new digital technologies, they succeeded in transforming their organisations rather quickly, and all agreed that these new technologies, for example, hybrid meetings, have come to stay, as they offer new possibilities for contact with and among their members.

As for the external communication, all four of them found that they did a good job. As already mentioned, they informed and fed the media with new insights daily or weekly, and they had formal as well as informal meetings with the governmental and health agencies followed by internal updates in the trade associations and among their members. Although it is part of the *raison d’être* of a trade association to reach the media and have a say in the decisions at the political level, it is even more important during serious crises.

On top of this, HORESTA (TA1) and Visita (TA4) also found a need for conducting large campaigns for the sake of their members during a crisis like the pandemic. Inspired by the campaign of HORESTA in Denmark, Visita – together with the union and the Swedish government – launched a “Safe to Visit” campaign to enable people to travel inside of Sweden again. Visita’s communication officer explained it in the following way:

I do not think a big campaign should have changed anything really, but it may be that it would have been good for us, to reach our members and make them feel that Visita is behind them, taking care of their engagement, so to say. (TA4)

Thus, communicating externally with the public and the industry through a campaign works as auto-communication (Christensen, 2018) and shows commitment to their members.

When asked about the long-term crisis and if they experienced any corona fatigue, SMVdanmark’s communication officer emphasised that although “some

may start asking themselves, will this ever stop, or will this become the new normal, helping desperate members is extremely meaningful, and it makes staff very motivated for their daily job during the Covid-19 crisis” (TA2).

Finally, according to the four chief communication officers, the trade associations of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are fulfilling their key mission, and their members are, so far, satisfied with their visibility and performance during the Covid-19 crisis, even though they did not obtain all the financial support they were seeking (full support or compensation versus loans; and short versus long pay-back time of loans).

Interdependencies and patterns of interaction in the rhetorical arena

What do these findings tell us about the interdependencies and patterns of interactions in the rhetorical arena from the perspective of SMEs and trades associations in Scandinavia? Both the voices of SMEs and of trade associations engage in chains or patterns of interactions with other voices in the arena.

As for the SMEs, they feed the trade associations with insights about their needs from surveys and one-to-one conversations, and in return, they receive information, support, and advice from the trade associations directly as well as indirectly through their presence in the media. At the same time, SMEs communicate among themselves through Facebook networks and clubs to learn from one another.

As for trade associations, they engage in at least three different patterns. First, they interact with their members, as described above. Another pattern is that, following every press conference of the government or the health authorities, the trade association informs and guides their members on how to interpret and work with the changing restrictions. Next, they interact with the government and health authorities, indirectly through the media as well as directly through participating in meetings, informing them on the needs of their members and trying to influence decision-making. In this way, trade associations, media, and public authorities are mutually interdependent. Finally, to point to yet another pattern, the trade associations interact with the public – indirectly through the media, and directly through a public campaign – to become visible and show commitment to their SME members, as well as to attract new SME members to their trade organisation. Centrality, intensity, visibility, and interdependency are key words for the voices of the trade associations in the rhetorical arena of Covid-19.

Discussion

What were the most important challenges to corporate crisis management and crisis communication during the Covid-19 pandemic? As already mentioned,

the long-term crisis of Covid-19 has challenged the traditional approach to crisis management and crisis communication, in particular the insufficiency of the life-cycle approach and the strong need for resilience and an emergent approach to management, as well as new forms of communication to deal with corona fatigue and internal communication during lockdowns.

What were the most interesting findings and contributions of the small explorative study? First and foremost, the study discovered that across the Scandinavian countries, crisis management and crisis communication among SMEs and trade associations during the Covid-19 crisis seemed to be quite similar: same kind of problems, same dynamics and patterns of interactions, and same type of institutional systems.

How did the SMEs within the hospitality industry handle the crisis? The SMEs were mostly unprepared, with no crisis plans – the crisis was a shock to them. With no income and having to lay off staff, the financial and social consequences were large. As the companies were small, they recognised that alone, they had no impact on governmental decisions. They needed help from the trade associations to have influence at the political level, but also for sense-making processes, information-seeking, and problem-solving to make their business survive. If not before, the role and benefits of being part of a trade association became clear to the SMEs during the pandemic. Compared to theory, the SMEs were forced to apply an emergent approach, to improvise and to learn to be resilient. However, some were more resilient than others.

Next, what was the role of the trade associations in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden speaking on behalf of an industry and acting as intermediaries between companies, government, media, and the public during the Covid-19 pandemic? Our study shows that the roles, presence, and importance of the trade associations have not only changed to include new functions, but they have also been strongly intensified. They not only fulfilled their traditional role, but also had an important new role to play for the crisis problem-solving of their members and the industry during this long-term crisis. They were highly visible in the media and to the public, and they were able to make themselves heard at the political level. They were considered highly valuable actors and sources of information by journalists, politicians, and civil servants, as well as by their own members.

Furthermore, our study shows that the trade associations became central voices in the rhetorical arena of Covid-19. They communicated a lot compared with normal times, both internally and externally, and shifted for new digital technology when possible. The increase in media coverage was huge, the number of formal and informal meetings at the political level was important, and they even did campaigns to get the attention of the public and to show commitment to their members.

Most importantly, our study contributes to the development of theory by adding new insights into the under-researched area of extra-communication,

that is, communication between a trade association and its members during a crisis. The study has revealed new ways of communicating with members, including the role of psychologist. Furthermore, the study contributes to the rhetorical arena theory as it has identified new patterns of interaction and interdependencies among voices in the arena, including the voices of intermediaries.

As for practical implications, the study demonstrates that it will be fruitful to strengthen crisis preparedness and resilience among SMEs in the Scandinavian countries, and that SMEs can benefit from collaborating in a trade association or similar network. A crisis is a dangerous moment for a corporation but an opportunity for a trade association.

Concluding remarks

The Covid-19 pandemic makes visible the dynamics and interdependencies among the three subfields: public sector, political, and corporate crisis management. This crisis also demonstrates the importance of applying a multivocal approach to crisis communication in the rhetorical arena, anticipating and taking the multiple voices and their use of specific crisis communication strategies into account. Main challenges to the SMEs have been revealed, and we have gained special insights into the strengths and importance of the trade associations during the pandemic. The communication work of these associations is immense and complex, as they deal with internal, external, and extra-communication with staff, members, and external stakeholders, and having roles as personal counsellors, information providers, and media and public affairs managers. Interestingly, the insights that we have gained into the perceptions and work of chief communication officers in trade associations in the Scandinavian countries show that challenges and experiences in relation to their members and their roles seem to be the same. Hence, the idea of a specific Nordic model and its importance for the handling of a global crisis is supported.

However, it is important to emphasise that we have only conducted a very small and explorative study. To study similarities and differences more in depth within corporate crisis management between Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, it would be interesting to expand the study to include more corporations, more industries, and more trade associations or meta-organisations within the three countries, not only from the perspective of industries that have been severely affected, but also from industries that have been affected less or have turned the crisis into an opportunity. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to also study the handling of the crisis from the perspectives of the individual member organisations in all three countries.

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