When an international disaster strikes close to home
Mayors’ responses to the victimization of their community in trans-border crisis situations

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Abstract
This thesis replicates the “Crisis leadership by mayors: a qualitative content analysis of newspapers and social media on the MH17 disaster” study by W. Jong, M. L. A. Dückers and P.G. van der Velden (2016). Their study analysed how the behaviour and activities of the 54 Dutch mayors, whose communities were affected by the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 were evaluated by the public and media in newspapers and through social media sources.

The objective of this thesis was to examine the activities and the behavior of the German mayors, whose communities were affected by the crash of GermanWings Flight 9525 and compare them to the findings of the research by W. Jong, M.L.A. Dückers and P.G. van der Velden (2016). This study analyses the meaning making of German mayors’ activities and performance as presented in social media and German newspapers. The main research question examined in the study was ‘which 4U9525-related activities – or absence of expected activities – of German mayors are mentioned in social media and German newspapers and if and how were they evaluated at different stages during the first year after this disaster?’ An important aspect of this thesis is the relationship between media and politics, since the behaviour of political figures will be analysed through media outlets that have evaluated this behaviour or the absence of expected behaviour/activities. The relationship between politics and media outlets is highly important for political leaders. Recent studies conclude that media exposure can have a sizeable effect on political attitudes and voting behaviour, which are essential to a democratically elected politician (Besley & Burgess, 2002; Hamilton, 2004). Therefore close attention was paid to the critical evaluation of local political leader by the newspapers chosen for analysis.
The results of the analysis of the newspapers and social media show (also in context with the crash of MH17) that public meaning making activities are highly appreciated by affected communities and positively evaluated by the general public. It was found that in community crisis situations the general public expects mayors to fulfil certain roles and activities that are outside of the scope of their usual duties, such as speaking at memorial services and acting as “mournern-in-chief” in the affected community. Interestingly characteristics the public expects mayors to possess are the same in general as they are in crisis situations. The study concludes with suggestions on future research topics in relation to crisis management after a-typical disasters and advises German mayors to cautiously explore the more private role of a “citizen father” – similar to the already existing role in the Netherlands – in the aftermath of a disaster, since their private involvement was highly appreciated in the aftermath of the GermanWings disaster by victims’ families and the general public.

Keywords: Germanwings crash, 4U9525, Germanwings Absturz, Germanwings, mayors, Bürgermeister
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1. Introduction

1.1. Summary of events GermanWings disaster

Flight 9525 operated as a regular flight between Barcelona-El Prat Airport in Spain and Düsseldorf International Airport in Germany run by the GermanWings Airline. However, on March 24th 2015, the aircraft, an Airbus 320-211, crashed into the French Alps in the territory of Prads-Haute-Bléone killing all 150 persons on board, including 72 Germans (Stockrahm, 2015; Focus, 2015; Spiegel Online, 2015; Tagesschau, 2015).

Shortly after the last routine contact between the pilot and air traffic control was made and the plane had reached its assigned cruising altitude, the co-pilot initiated the constant descent of the plane, which eventually ended with a collision of the plane with the massif des Trois-Évêchés.

While the exact course of events inside the plane can only be hypothesized by means of the records of the black box, investigations have concluded that the co-pilot had deliberately caused the collision and the consequent deaths of all those on board of the plane after he had successfully locked the pilot out of the cockpit.

As Stockrahm (2015) illustrates the pilot left the cockpit shortly after his last contact with air traffic control when he confirmed the plane’s course at 10:30 AM. In the absence of the pilot, the co-pilot locked the cockpit from inside and changed the settings of the autopilot from 38000 feet to 100 feet, changed the flight mode into descent mode and increases the velocity of the plane to the maximum rate.

From 10:33 AM onwards ground control repeatedly tried to contact the co-pilot, who did not answer. At the same time the pilot tried repeatedly to get the co-pilot to open the cockpit door without success. At 10:41:06 AM the plane finally crashed into the French Alps causing the immediate death of everyone on board and the total destruction of the plane (Focus, 2015).
Over the course of the investigations into the crash, the national authorities of Germany and France and the French Civil Aviation Safety Investigation Authority (BEA), as well as the various media outlets reporting about the crash, painted a somewhat incomplete picture of the co-pilot, who was suffering from depression and had suicidal tendencies, for which he was treated (BEA, 2016; Tagesschau, 2015; Zeit Online, 30 March 2015).

On the day of the tragic event, the co-pilot was declared unfit for work by a doctor and referred to see a specialist to be treated for psychosomatic and anxiety disorder. While his employer was unaware of the current medical situation of the co-pilot, since he kept it a secret, they were nonetheless aware of his past psychological problems (Zeit Online, 31 March 2015).

The crash on March 24th, 2015 came as a terrible shock. After the determination of the cause, society was even more shocked. The fact that the co-pilot had deliberately crashed the plane and killed everyone on board turned the event into the first undisputed suicide by pilot in the context of a commercial flight, which killed a large number of people, in Europe

1.2. Jong et al. research results

To be able to compare this case with the original study by Jong et al. (2016), this thesis begins with a short overview of their main findings in the introduction in order to be able to compare the findings of both studies side by side in the discussion section of this thesis.

Jong, Dückers and van der Velden (2016) assessed in their research, which activities that Dutch mayors were or were not involved in after the crash of MH17, were mentioned in (social) media. Their research question was 'Which MH17-related activities (or absence of certain activities) of Dutch mayors are mentioned in the (social) media and if and how were they evaluated at different stages during the first year after this disaster?' (Jong et al., 2016, p. 4) A total of 193 Dutch victims from 54 communities were killed in the downing of MH17.

1 Worldwide there are more cases of homicide-suicide events caused by pilots such as the Japan Airlines Flight 350, Royal Air Maroc Flight 630, SilkAir Flight 185, EyptAir Flight 990, LAM Mozambique Airlines Flight 40, and potentially Malaysian Airlines Flight 370
The analysis of Jong et al. (2016) showed that public ‘meaning making’ and ‘remembering’ by mayors were the most important and absolutely necessary actions that were mentioned in (social) media (Jong et al., 2016). Additionally, their findings suggest that mayors are expected to fulfil certain roles and participation in some activities as their duties. Mayors were expected to attend and speak at memorial services and community gatherings (Jong et al., 2016). Lastly, families of victims highly appreciated it when a mayor visited them to listen to them in the privacy of their homes, thereby demonstrating a role of “mourners-in-chief” in local communities (Jong et al., 2016).

Jong et al. (2016) found that most activities that involved mayors were evaluated in a neutral manner. Jong et al. (2016) hypothesized that this neutrality is due to the fact that there was no direct political responsibility of the mayors in the downing of the plane. Yet, the absence of responsibility for the crisis itself does not indicate absence of political responsibility in the aftermath. Jong et al. (2016) offered multiple explanations for the neutrality of the newspapers and tweets in the aftermath of MH-17, which will form part of the discussion together with our findings. However, there was also a significant amount of positive feedback, since mayors were perceived as supportive of victims’ families and mourned with their local communities.

1.3. Goal of study, main research question and hypothesis
The goal of this study is threefold. Firstly, it aims to provide greater insight into crisis leadership by (local) political heads and theoretical overview on the topic. Secondly, the goal is to understand the disaster-related performance of German mayors and lastly, it aims to evaluate their performance to be able to contribute to constructive future crisis leadership. In order to achieve these goals, it was decided to execute a qualitative content analysis of regular media and online social media sources and draw appropriate conclusions from the findings. During the course of the research it became evident that even though theory in crisis management is abundant, research in the field of local crisis management in the event of an international disaster appears to be limited. Thus this
research aims to offer some insights into this field of study, whose importance could potentially increase in an ever-more globalized world.

The main research question of this thesis is: ‘Which 4U9525-related activities – or absence of expected activities – of German mayors are mentioned in social media and German newspapers and if and how were they evaluated at different stages during the first year after this disaster?’

Other questions this thesis examined were: ‘Are there similarities between Haltern am See and Hilversum – the two towns most affected in both disasters?’ ‘Are there unexpected differences in responses across the examined media sources?’ ‘Are the responses to mayors’ activities similar or dissimilar in Germany and the Netherlands?’ ‘Are meaning-making activities more important than other activities in the aftermath of a disaster?’

Based on the findings of Jong et al. (2016) it is hypothesized that public ‘meaning-making’ and ‘remembering’ activities will also be considered the most important activities in the case of German mayors and 4U9525 and consequently focused on by newspapers and social media posts.

It is believed that their presence at memorial services, including the national memorial service in Cologne was expected, at least from those mayors, who lost multiple victims or govern larger cities, which were home to victims. Therefore it is to be expected that mayors such as Thomas Geisel, Bodo Klimpel and Jürgen Roters are mentioned frequently across different newspapers and social media platforms.

It was decided to examine whether there were particular similarities or differences between Hilversum and Haltern am See. Both towns were comparatively small and lost the highest numbers of victims in the two fatal crashes.
2. Theoretical framework & literature review

2.1. Characteristics of a crisis/traumatic event/disaster
Disasters are events that are of either natural or human-made origin, and cause far-reaching damage, adversity and/or loss of life and they affect parts or the whole of a society. They are usually not foreseeable and strike unexpectedly and swiftly. While their occurrence is unforeseeable and their duration can vary from acute and swift to chronic, the consequences of disasters are often long-term and far-reaching on all levels of society. “Disasters, by definition, are both potentially traumatic, and may overwhelm the available community resources, further threatening the individuals’ and the community’s ability to cope” (Ursano, Fullerton & McCaughey, 1994, pp. 5-6). According to Dyson and ‘t Hart (2013) events or conditions that are experienced or considered as crises share three common characteristics.

**Threat**

Firstly, the core values of a community are considered to be under threat. “Widely shared values such as safety and security, welfare and health, integrity and fairness can be shattered as a result of (looming) violence, physical destruction, government incompetence, institutional corruption, or other agents of destabilization” (Dyson & ‘t Hart, 2013, p.1). Furthermore, the perception of threat is subjective and contextual in crisis situations and is relatively hard to predict, therefore not only directly affected communities might experience elevated stress levels and a perception of threat, but also individuals, who fall outside of this group. This perception of threat and consequential psychological impact of adverse events is further connected to and determined by factors such as the perceivers beliefs about order and a just world, normalcy, and control. According to Quarantelli (1998) these factors vary widely between and within individuals and groups and partially depend on prior exposure to and experience with crisis situations and existing levels of preparedness.
**Sense of urgency**

The second characteristic that Dyson and ‘t Hart (2013) distinguish is the association between crises with a *sense of urgency*. Usually vast or tough problems do not appear suddenly and they can be efficiently worked through by bureaucracies in due time. However, in the case of a problem appearing and escalating quickly, the political system is forced into improvisational mode and needs to operate swiftly. While first responders such as police and emergency services are equipped for these scenarios and real-time response modes, policy bureaucracies are generally not (Dyson and ‘t Hart, 2013). In cases of conflict and need for negotiation, those, who put pressure on the other side by setting deadlines or an ultimatum, also automatically put pressure on themselves.

**Degree of uncertainty**

The last characteristic mentioned by Dyson and ‘t Hart (2013) is a *high degree of uncertainty*. This uncertainty applies to both, the nature of the crisis itself, and also the potential consequences and aftermath. Questions such as “What happened?”, “How did it happen?” and “What can be done?” all have to be resolved satisfactorily and rapidly. However, the uncertainty of the events can have an implication on the answers to these questions especially concerning solutions. “How should the government respond?”, “What are the options?”, “Which option is considered best?” and “How will people respond?” are all important matters that need discussion and decision-making within a short timeframe, yet simultaneously they could have far-reaching implications and are therefore difficult to execute.

Combining the three features discussed above, a crisis therefore consists of events that are interpreted as a *threat to the basic structures or values of an individual or group, which needs to be responded to urgently under highly uncertain conditions*. Since crises can consist of a variety of different phenomena, it is beneficial to classify them in terms of the nature of the situation. The most widely studied type of crisis is called *situational crisis* (Dyson and ‘t
Hart, 2013). The main challenge here lies in responding to destruction inflicted by adverse forces, independent of the (immediate) cause of the event. Another category that has gained attention is *institutional crisis* (Dyson and ’t Hart, 2013).

A situational crisis can easily unfold into an institutional one and there are many small- and large-scale examples. One large-scale example is terrorist attacks such as 9/11 and also more recent ones in Western nations such as France and Belgium. All these crises were initially situational and transformed into institutional crises when governments were forced to reconsider their capacities to predict, prevent and respond to terrorist phenomena. Other, more localized, crises like the Love Parade disaster or the collapse of the roof of an ice skating rink in Germany also became institutional crises. In both cases the mayors could not secure their political survival afterwards, since they were unable to respond adequately to the events (Bachmeister, 2012; Zeit Magazin, 2016). However, institutional crises will not be discussed further in this research, since the GermanWings disaster did not develop into one.

### 2.1.1. Application of crisis and disaster characteristics to the GermanWings Crash

The GermanWings crash can be considered a crisis due to objective factors such as the economic damage incurred and the number of fatalities resulting from the crash. It fulfils characteristics such as causing of far-reaching damage and loss of life, which more or less affected large parts of society. Additionally, the crash was unforeseeable and swift, lasting only a few minutes itself. The aftermath of the crash such as the collection and repatriation of remains and investigations took several months and the grieving process for the next of kin will continue in the future. The disaster triggered international debates on aviation safety such as regulations that there need to be two authorized airline personnel present in the cockpit at all times during a flight or the questionable regulation that cockpit doors cannot be opened from the outside in cases of emergency since 2001 (Watt, 2015). Furthermore, it generated debates on the mental health of airline personnel; especially pilots and whether the (medical) requirement of confidentiality should be lifted under these circumstances to better ensure air traffic security (Frankfurter Allgemeine, 2015).
Apart from these objective factors, the characteristics that qualify an event as a crisis are also fulfilled in the case of the 4U9525 crash. Firstly, a plane crash threatens core values of a community – such as safety and security, health, integrity and fairness – since it causes physical destruction and has traumatic effects on surviving victims and victims’ families. Furthermore, the crash also affected the decision-making processes of other airline personnel and passengers, who were scared for their own safety after the crash and refused to fly in the immediate aftermath. Therefore these individuals estimated the level of threat to their own safety high enough to make the decision not to fly, even though they were no immediate victims or related to immediate victims of the crash.

Immediately after the crash of GermanWings Flight 9525 a sense of urgency developed. There was high uncertainty concerning the number of victims, possible survivors, exact location of the crash, and most importantly the cause of the crash. As discussed by Dyson and ’t Hart tough problems usually do not develop suddenly and there is time for trial and error approaches until the best solution is found. In the event of a plane crash the responses must be swift, since they could be a matter of life and death. In the crash of Flight 4U9525 first responders were able to locate the wreck relatively quickly and confirmed that there was no possibility of survivors the same day as the crash. Thus uncertainty about the fate of significant others was almost absent.

In response to the incident and the circumstances under which the crash happened aviation authorities in multiple countries inside and outside of Europe implemented new regulations that require the presence of two authorized personnel in the cockpit at all times (Watt, 2015). Like most air traffic catastrophes the crash of GermanWings Flight 9525 (4U9525) can be considered a disaster due to the inflicted damage, the number of casualties, but also because of the circumstances under which it happened, the difficult access to the wreck and identification of remains, the problems the helpers, officials and family members of the victims faced as well as the consequences for international air traffic and the ensuing debate on the requirement of confidentiality in the medical profession when it comes to air plane personnel.
2.2. Communities affected directly by the crash

In total 31 German communities were affected by the crash of 4U9525. These communities were headed by 15 ‘Oberbürgermeister’, 41 ‘Bürgermeister’ and two ‘Landräte’ at the time of the disaster. They have several distinctive and important duties after their municipalities are affected by a crisis, such as being part/leader of a crisis management team and the closest leading public official responsible for the victims and their families, whether the disaster happened at the local level and took place within the territorial boundaries of the municipality or happened to community members in a different place. In the case of the GermanWings crash the disaster happened on an international level and therefore distinguishes itself from crises that are only locally faced by a community, in contrast to for instance the Paris and Brussels terrorist attacks (2015 & 2016 respectively) happened within municipal boundaries and mayors had an important public role and also in the management of the crisis. However, in the case of the GermanWings crash, similar to the downing of MH17 or MetroJet Flight 9268 on the Sinai Peninsula, the crisis happened abroad. Therefore (multiple) national authorities organized all investigations related to the crash and its causes, the recovery of remaining bodies/ body parts and belongings of the victims, their identification and repatriation. Moreover, memorials were mostly coordinated nationally, apart from the special one for the school group from Haltern am See. Most press conferences and information provision were also organized at the national level and on higher political levels.

A second important issue is the fact that the victims came from many municipalities within Germany and were not limited to one community. As such the crash of GermanWings Flight 9525 offers insight into the handling of the crisis by several local political leaders, who were all faced with the same situation, similar to the Dutch mayors, who had to face the aftermath of MH17. And while aviation disasters are a relatively common and unavoidable occurrence since the invention of the plane, the GermanWings crash is to some extent special, since it was caused deliberately by a person – and not due to technical failure – similar to the crashes of MH17 and Metrojet Flight 9268, or even 9/11, which were also caused deliberately.

2 However, this analysis will only include the 31 local heads of politics that were directly involved.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Mayor</th>
<th>Number of victims from community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Berlin</td>
<td>Michael Müller</td>
<td>2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bochum</td>
<td>Otilie Scholz</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brakel</td>
<td>Hermann Temme</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dortmund</td>
<td>Ulrich Sierau</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duisburg</td>
<td>Sören Link</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Düsseldorf</td>
<td>Thomas Geisel</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essen</td>
<td>Reinhard Paß</td>
<td>2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gauting</td>
<td>Brigitte Kössinger</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gütersloh</td>
<td>Maria Unger</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halle</td>
<td>Dr. Bernd Wiegand</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haltern</td>
<td>Bodo Klimpel</td>
<td>18**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kleve</td>
<td>Theodor Brauer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Köln</td>
<td>Jürgen Roters</td>
<td>3*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leipzig</td>
<td>Burkhard Jung</td>
<td>2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leverkusen</td>
<td>Bernhard Marewski</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Löhne</td>
<td>Heinz-Dieter Held</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lünen</td>
<td>Hans Wilhelm Stodollick</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meerbusch</td>
<td>Angelika Mielke-Westerlage</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minden</td>
<td>Michael Buhre</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montabaur (Stadt)</td>
<td>Gabriele Wieland</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montabaur (Kreis)</td>
<td>Edmund Schaaf</td>
<td>1***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mülheim a.dr. Ruhr</td>
<td>Dagmar Mühlenfeld</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.3. The profession of mayor in Germany and public expectations

The profession of mayor became a fulltime profession across German cities and counties in the latter half of the 20th century (Gisevius, 1999). The mayor’s profession nowadays consists of managing the city’s or community’s administration and to be the highest representative of the community. Therefore, political activities, prioritizing between different alternatives of city building efforts and political discourse are all matters that fall within the scope of administrative activities. Mayors are responsible for the development of the commune and the coexistence between citizens; they participate in public discussions, political committees and decisions of prioritization. Therefore, a mayor is not solely a leading figure for the political climate within the community, but his or her decisions also influence administrative processes heavily.

According to Gisevius’ (1999) study on German mayors, a function that a mayor should fulfil is to be a catalyst. He or she should be able to figure out and emphasize the different standing points, interests and controversies between stake holders and find out what they have in common and what solution is best considering also models of and trends in city development. Furthermore, the mayor is also expected to be a coordinator, who attempts to bring together interest groups, investors, experts, stakeholders and parties and also keep them in dialogue. Simultaneously a mayor is also a communicator, who can approach citizen groups and individuals, even when they are not necessarily supportive of the mayor,
his/her behaviour or activities. This means a mayor has to be a strong person, who considers the positive interests and development of the community a priority.

A study conducted by Bogumil and Holtkamp (2002) across different cities in North Rhine-Westphalia and Baden Wuerttemberg investigated whether mayors fulfilled the expectations that citizens had of their role as a local public leader and whether there was a difference in both states in the expectations of mayors’ roles, activities and performance. In their study they inquired participants what they believed to be the most important characteristics or traits of a mayor. Across all participants the four most important characteristics expected in general were:

- Credibility/Authenticity
- Close proximity to/involvement with citizens
- Leadership abilities
- Neutrality towards parties and other interest groups – including their own party (Holtkamp & Bogumil, 2002)

Gehne (2014) also builds on these characteristics and expands them to also include administrative competences and a connection/commitment to the local identity. He further discusses the relationship that mayors have with their community, city council and administration in his research. According to him citizens face their mayor in different roles (also discussed in Bogumil, Holtkamp & Schwarz, 2003). Citizens are customers in the context of services and administration. They are also principals when it comes to the legitimisation of elections, and co-creators when it comes to citizen participation and society (Gehne, 2014). Depending on the role the citizen slipped into at the moment, their expectations in the mayor vary accordingly. When a citizen is a customer he/she expects administrative processes to be efficient and inexpensive. As a principal and co-creator citizens expect to be informed about political processes in the commune and that the city council and the mayor represent their interests.

Obviously this constant change and also overlap in different roles poses some troubles for the mayor, who has to fulfil preferably all citizens’ expectations. It is highly unlikely to find and elect a person as mayor, who is good at all tasks that citizens expect mayors to fulfil, e.g.
some people are great at mastering administrative tasks, but don’t feel comfortable in social situations or vice versa (Gehne 2014, Schäfer 2011). Therefore the normal case is a mayor, who has strengths and weaknesses, which is not necessarily bad, as long as the respective mayor is aware of these flaws, builds on his/her strengths and gets appropriate support in areas of weakness. Furthermore, many skills can be learned and improved throughout the term of office. Gehne (2014) again emphasizes though – similar to Bogumil and Holtkamp (2002) – that it is extremely important for a mayor to be in regular contact with citizens and not leave an impression of distance and inapproachability.

It is difficult to balance these expectations, because on the one hand citizens wish for a mayor to be approachable and close to society, open-minded and welcoming to all citizens. On the other hand the mayor is expected to be a role model with leadership skills and professional competences, who makes the right decisions even when faced with resistance from the city council, parties and other interest groups (Gehne, 2014). However, this desire for close proximity and the expectations of professional distance and leadership are hard to fulfil simultaneously. Consequently, there is a danger that a mayor either becomes one, who is friendly with everybody, but neglects his role as a leader and decision-maker or he/she becomes distanced from the electorate and other stakeholders and develops into a lone fighter (Kern, 2008). This discrepancy can however, be balanced by two characteristics according to Gehne (2014), namely openness and credibility. These two attributes ensure that a mayor will not end up making decisions solely by himself and also to turn his words into actions. Both of these attributes can only be ensured however, when a mayor communicates with society.

There are multiple ways in which a mayor can communicate with citizens. Firstly the mayor should be present at public events as much as possible, since he/she is a representative of his/her commune. As the community’s first citizen, the mayor is invited to many events by associations, organizations and other social events. Attending these events shows that the mayor is present in the city’s and community’s lives. His/her presence also offers the opportunity for citizens to approach the mayor directly. Besides, having the mayor attend a social gathering is also very flattering for the organizers and makes them more sympathetic towards the mayor. The attendance of the mayor also
shows that he/she is involved with the community and feels personally responsible for it. Furthermore, local media tend to cover events where the mayor is present and therefore even citizens, who did not attend the event themselves, are made aware of the mayor’s presence.

Apart from attending social events, the mayor is also able to invite citizens to public events or events aimed at certain citizen groups. These events attract attention and facilitate proximity between the mayor and the public. It is important that the mayor includes all citizen groups in these activities and shows openness and attention towards different interest groups when meeting them. Moreover, the mayor can also use other channels of direct communication. Discussion rounds, special office hours reserved to receive citizens, Q&A sessions as well as the active utilization of social media sources can facilitate a connection between the mayor and the public. Through offering such possibilities for discussion a mayor already makes himself/herself more approachable. But this alone is not enough. Mayors are also expected to act upon their word and react to matters that citizens bring up. This does not necessarily mean that a mayor has to solve all problems that come up within the community, but he/she should at least attempt to help.

As will be discussed in the following sections, a crisis event can pose a political challenge that needs to be responded to adequately, and which reinforces the characteristics discussed by Bogumil and Holtkamp (2002); otherwise a situational crisis can easily turn into an institutional one. Besides certain activities that mayors should engage in in the aftermath of a disaster that struck their constituency, a mayor should ensure to be credible, involved with his/her community and show leadership abilities suitable in the face of a crisis (Boin and ‘t Hard 2003). These expectations could influence the evaluation of a mayor’s behaviour and actions by the media and public. Especially in the aftermath of crises the public mood is relatively volatile and emotional. Thus it could have potentially negative repercussions on the mayor’s political future, if his/her actions and behaviour are deemed unfit by the public, or if he/she does not live up to public expectations. “Coupled with a media bias toward ‘gotcha journalism’, this can make for a volatile environment in which to deal with emergencies. If things are badly handled, even to a modest degree, there is a new potential for escalation into full-blown crisis” (Pal, 2014).
An example of a mayor, who did not engage in these behaviours in the aftermath of a local crisis, is Adolf Sauerland, the former mayor of Duisburg. To him any denial of responsibility for the Loveparade disaster seemed more pressing in the direct aftermath than victim support and he displayed an overall failure to lead in the face of crisis. This led to negative repercussions from the public, which eventually resulted in his removal as mayor (Zeit Magazin, 2016).

2.4. Crisis coping: political challenges and appropriate responses

2.4.1. Crisis management in local politics
When faced with a crisis situation – such as the situation examined in this study, but also in different more localized crisis situations – leaders need to respond to challenges that can be divided into four different categories: sense making, decision-making, meaning making, and learning (Boin, ‘t Hart, Stern & Sundelius, 2005; ‘t Hart & Tindall, 2009).

2.4.1.1. Sense making
As discussed earlier, one characteristic of crises is uncertainty. Especially in early stages signals can be vague, conflicting and/or ambivalent. Thus policymakers need to interpret them as indicative of the seriousness of the problem, which in turn cannot be dealt with using standard means and methods, which are used for routine problems. “Sense making is about diagnosing the nature of the situation in the face of ‘unness’: unwanted, unpleasant, unplanned, and unexpected circumstances” (Dyson and ‘t Hart, 2013, p.3). Consequently, the realities of the unfolding events have to be continuously “tested” by politicians in order to determine the best course of action and what information needs to be communicated to the public and other actors involved. The signals that need to be interpreted by politicians come from a number of different sources, some of which are more prominent than others, but not necessarily more accurate. Some sources might spread rumours and speculation or information that has nothing at all to do with the reality of events. It is therefore an immensely difficult task to determine the level of threat, the number of affected people, the scope of intervention and which methods of intervention are best suited for the situation, how the crisis is likely to develop, and which information can be trusted in the face of doubt. This was also the case in the direct aftermath of the GermanWings disaster, since a terrorist
attack and technical failure could not be immediately ruled out as causes of the disaster, neither was it possible to tell whether anyone on board had survived initially.

2.4.1.2. Decision-making
Crisis response confronts governments and public agencies with urgent choices that potentially entail political risks and contradictory values. Politicians may have to face questions of responsibility, need to decide whether to speak out/up or stay silent, they have to decide whether they help or stand by, and if they help to what extent they can and are willing to help, and depending on the nature of the crisis and the outcomes of all their decisions they might eventually have to decide whether they back down or step up. Therefore, the decisions in the face of crisis can make or break a politician’s career.

However, as mentioned by Dyson and ‘t Hart (2013) in the heat of an emergency responsible politicians tend to be pressured immensely to show solidarity and generosity. This pressure can sometimes make it difficult to discern legitimate from opportunistic or criminal demands. This was also the case in the GermanWings crash where a woman pretended to be a cousin of one of the victims and tried to claim monetary compensation for the death of her supposed cousin. However, the fraud was detected relatively quickly and legal actions were taken against her.

2.4.1.3. Meaning-making
In situations of crisis, public leaders not only have to make sense of events for themselves and in their own minds, but they must also make meaning for their communities, and depending on their level of influence, their nation and in some cases even the world (Dyson & ‘t Hart, 2013). The aim of meaning-making efforts is to control public uncertainty through the production of an authoritative account of the disaster, why the events happened and what caused them, and finally what actions have been and must be taken in order to restore a sense of normalcy. Consequently, a large part of public meaning making involves conversational reconstruction and framing of the events and public persuasion of the official narrative. Especially important in the discourse are the communication of the significance of the events and the causes of the crisis. The significance is important for the public to be able to understand the scope and effect of the crisis. The causes of the crisis need to be discussed to help people understand why the events happened the way they did,
how it was possible for them to occur in the first place and eventually how such events can be avoided in the future.

Since one of the most important roles for public leaders is to protect public order and national interests, and ensure health and safety, crises put politicians in a precarious situation, since they jeopardise this role. “The public, media, and political opponents want to know what went wrong and who should be held responsible” (Dyson & ‘t Hart, 2013). Therefore, causal frames are especially important for the outcome in the question of accountability. In cases where causal frames highlight the foreseeability and controllability of the crisis and identify responsible individuals to be blamed those individuals face harsh consequences and are publicly blamed for their failures and policy changes are expected to be implemented rapidly. On the other hand, where frames attribute the causes of a crisis on forces that could not be foreseen or controlled, public figures are not held accountable for the events and are therefore not expected to be sanctioned or make any significant policy changes (Bovens & ‘t Hart, 1996).

As mentioned above, political leaders must give meaning to the events of a crisis in the face of public anxiety and potential political risks. These efforts of meaning-making are further complicated by the task of having to persuade people, who are in an aroused state and have already formed an opinion about the events that might not fit into the official narrative. Furthermore, there is a danger for public leaders that they could distort their own sense-making processes with their public meaning-making discourse. According to Janis & Mann publicly committing to one interpretation of events can trigger cognitive biases that then influence private cognition and can potentially cause the disregard for new information and cognitive closure (Janis & Mann, 1977). Additionally, since the rise of global media and social media, politicians no longer have the monopoly on narrative framing of crises. Those, who oppose or distrust the government and its account of the unfolding events, will have their own ideas and interpretations of the crisis and will want to have their crisis narrative accepted by the media and public as the dominant account. Since the silencing of such counter-narratives is not only undemocratic, but would also prove to be impossible, because of social media access, these narratives also have to be addressed by policymakers. This is relevant for the GermanWings disaster, because the official narrative has been
questioned repeatedly since the incident and many people – including the family of the co-pilot – still question the official narrative of the disaster’s causes today.

2.4.1.4. Learning
While the intensity of a crisis dictates the efforts that are taken to avoid its repetition, determining which lessons are the right ones and what and how much should be invested into learning from them is a major leadership challenge according to Neustadt & May (1986). During the learning process policymakers need to balance between handling questions of responsibility and accountability in a charged political post-crisis environment – and ensuring their political survival – while at the same time they still have to make sense of the situation and its implications to be able to learn from it. The difficulties in the learning process in the context of local crises lie in two areas. Firstly, according to Rose & Davies (1994) learning can be negatively affected by hasty symbolic gestures coupled with policy overreaction in the direct aftermath of a crisis. Secondly, according to Boin, McConnell and 't Hart (2008) debating hard questions in political arenas during the sense-making process can pose risks of legal and political liability that politicians want to avoid. While the ‘learning’ category is not the focus of this research, one should realize that “the basis for effective crisis management lies in the human ability to recognize and correct mistakes.” (Comfort, 2007, p.1) Therefore it is generally an important aspect of successful crisis management and future crisis avoidance.

2.5. Factors in crisis communication of mayors and communes with the media
As briefly mentioned before, media sources and social media can also be utilized to reach people, who are not present at social gatherings attended by the mayor.

According to Gehne (2014), as well as Nassmacher (2008), reports in local media, especially local newspapers are highly important for mayors, since they form the local leading medium of opinion-forming. In addition local press or the press in general has increased their public profile on the Internet, where they offer their articles cross-medial. It is obviously in the interest of the mayor that the media reports on his/her activities as much as possible and presents him/her in a positive way, since his/her popularity and prominence is dependent on his/her presence in the media. It is thus important that the mayor or his office have a good relationship with local journalists for them to cover
appearances of the mayor at public events, but also in more serious matters such as decision-making processes.

However, in times of crisis media coverage extends far beyond the local level and depending on the situation even beyond national levels. Therefore, crisis situations require mayors to communicate in different ways than usual and take certain measures and steps, preferably pre-emptively, in order to guarantee that crisis management runs smoothly, is portrayed positively in the media, and consequently ensures the mayor’s political survival.

2.5.1. **Broad public(ity)**

In a crisis situation, which attracts interest from media sources and the public beyond the local community, a mayor has to be aware of the possibility that he/she does not solely have to answer critical questions from the local population and media representatives. The concept of congruency between a local or regional issue and the audience it attracts does not hold in a crisis situation. Therefore, even small communities have to be able to meet the challenge of being on a par with a far-reaching and professional (media) audience. Especially the case of Adolf Sauerland, the former lord mayor of Duisburg where 20 people died during the 2010 Love Parade, is an appropriate example of a politician, who did everything wrong and lost his credibility during press conferences immediately after the crisis and in that way became the scapegoat for a disaster he had officially no direct responsibility for (Bergmann, Isringhaus, Schwerdtfeger, 2015). Compared to Adolf Sauerland, Bodo Klimpel, the mayor of Haltern was portrayed in a highly positive way that exceeded the public expectations of a small-town mayor. He became somewhat of a symbol of a “perfect” mayor, who cares for his community and is capable of being role model in political leadership and crisis management.

2.5.2. **Social media**

In connection with credibility and information provision social media also gains an ever-increasing importance in crisis communication. Rumors, speculations and even complete fabrications can be published anonymously and independent of any truth on the Internet. Therefore proactive activities that include the release of relevant information are important, especially when certain communications about the crisis can be foreseen.
2.5.3. Responsibility hierarchies

The exact events of a crisis are evidently difficult to prepare for. Indeed one important characteristic discussed earlier is the swiftness and unpredictability with which a crisis strikes.

While one cannot prepare for the exact events that unfold in a crisis, there are some general mechanisms that are needed in any crisis. One of such mechanisms is the creation of internal administrative structures to ensure a coherent and coordinated presence in public (Klimpel, 2016). Part of this measure also includes the training of policymakers to be able to deal with the broad media exposure while coping with and managing the crisis. This responsibility hierarchy – including the appropriate training of policymakers – becomes more important the larger the crisis is that the administrations is facing.
3. Methodology

3.1. Type of study
This study is based on conventional qualitative content analysis of German newspapers and social media sources, e.g. Facebook and Twitter. Qualitative content analysis is one of several research methods employed to analyse text data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Research that applies qualitative content analysis, concentrates on the features of language as a form of communication. Observations focus on content or contextual meaning of a text (Lindkvist, 1981; McTavish & Pirro, 1990; Tesch, 1990). The text data can be in verbal, print or electronic form and derive from narrative responses, open-ended survey questions, interviews, focus groups, observations, print media – such as books, articles or manuals –, or social media platforms – such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram or Pinterest (Kondracki & Wellmann, 2002; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Thus, qualitative content analysis examines language intensely for the purpose of categorizing large amounts of text data (Weber, 1990). The resulting categories that represent similar meanings stem from either explicit communication or inferred communication (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

This approach was chosen for two main reasons. Firstly and most importantly, the original study is based on qualitative content analysis. In choosing the same type of analysis it was ensured to gain insight comparable to the original study’s results. Secondly, conventional qualitative content analysis was considered to be the best approach for this type of research due to the nature of the approach. Conventional qualitative content analysis is usually appropriate when existing theory or research literature on a phenomenon is limited.

3.2. Data collection
3.2.1. Parameters used in search queries and utilized databases
For the period of data collection a timeframe between March 24th, 2015 (day of the crash) and April 8th 2016 was chosen. April 8th 2016 was chosen as the cut-off date instead of March 31st (or March 25th – the day after the first anniversary), because some of the anniversary memorials for the victims were only held after the end of the Easter break
Due to their nature and importance the end of the research period was therefore extended.

In order to stay close to the parameters of the original research that this one is based on, the overall one-year period was divided in the same way it was done in the study by Jong, Dückers and van der Velden (2016). Therefore, the first period that was focused on (stage I) encompasses the first month, from March 24th 2015 through April 24th 2015, because these weeks usually cover the first responses of (local) political actors and the first local memorial services for the victims. While the original study set the timeframe for the second stage between the end of the first month after the disaster (August 18th 2015) and the National Memorial Day for the victims on November 10th 2015, the Central Memorial Day for the victims of the GermanWings crash already took place on April 17th 2015 and therefore falls within the timeframe of the first stage. Therefore the second stage was extended to include October 20th 2015, the day Angela Merkel visited the Joseph-König Gymnasium in Haltern am See. The small community was particularly affected by the disaster, since it lost 16 students and two teachers in the disaster. Since then the school has become a symbol for the tragedy due to its apparently large loss of human life. It also became a center of attention for media and social media. The last stage (stage III) then comprises the time from October 21st 2015 until April 8th 2016.

With respect to (social) media sources, three sources of information were focused on: German newspapers, Facebook posts by the affected mayors on their personal profiles (where available) or their public pages, and Twitter. The search was extended to include Facebook compared to the Dutch research paper, because Germans use Facebook to a larger extent than they use Twitter\(^3\). However, while extending the search by using two social media sources, it was also limited by only including posts of the affected mayors on their private and/or public profiles, and the comments by the public underneath those posts. Therefore any other profiles and pages on Facebook, which might mention a mayor

\(^3\) As can be seen in the statistic of Statista, there are nearly ten times as many German Facebook users than German Twitter users [http://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/157885/umfrage/reichweite-der-groessten-social-networks-in-deutschland/](http://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/157885/umfrage/reichweite-der-groessten-social-networks-in-deutschland/) (last accessed 08.06.2016)
in the specific context of the GermanWings crash, are left out, since it would exhaust the scope of this research and is not feasible.

3.2.1.1. Newspapers

To retrieve relevant newspaper articles two databases were used. The first one was an online academic news database (LexisNexis Academic). This database was used to obtain full reprints of published German newspaper articles from electronic archives. The second database used, was Google News Search. While this might seem to be an inappropriate source of reliable information, it was chosen, because LexisNexis was missing some national German newspapers relevant for the research, yet inaccessible through LexisNexis. The key words and combinations utilized for the searches were all in German and listed herein after: *germanwings* OR *4U9525* AND *bürgermeister* (in English: mayor) OR *oberbürgermeister* (in English: lord mayor) OR *landrat* (English: county commissioner) OR *landräte* (English: county commissioners). The search was further specified to only include articles in the German language. Afterwards those that were published in newspapers outside of Germany, namely Austria, Switzerland and Italy were excluded.

The total number of newspaper articles resulting from the initial search was 430 on LexisNexis. Out of those all newspapers were excluded, which 1) only covered the French mayors involved in the aftermath of the crash, 2) those that only covered the crash itself without any specific mentioning of an involved German mayor and 3) those that mentioned German mayors, but without mentioning the crash itself. Then those articles were excluded that were the same across multiple newspapers. This narrowed the results of the LexisNexis search down to 144 newspapers, which fit the search criteria.

In the same way the process was conducted with the newspaper articles that were found through the Google News Search. Those newspapers that were not published in Germany were excluded; the same time frame and source type were chosen, and all articles were excluded that overlapped within the Google News Search as well as with the LexisNexis articles. Those, which did not mention German mayors in context with the crash and those articles that mentioned mayors outside the context of the crash, were excluded. While the initial Google Search resulted in a promising 529 results, the eventually usable results
ended up being a total of 70 newspaper articles. However, the number is partially so small, because many articles found on the Google News Search were also found in LexisNexis. Therefore the total number of unique newspaper articles analyzed is 215.

3.2.1.2. Twitter

Relevant tweets were retrieved, using the Twitter advanced search query builder and those tweets were captured and exported with Linkclump, a Google Chrome extension application that facilitates exporting large quantities of data from search results\(^4\). Parameters were set to only include tweets in German, which were publicized during the set timeframe between 24.03.2015 and 08.04.2016. Re-tweets\(^5\) were included into the search. Tweets were searched and collected using a large quantity of different keyword combinations to capture as many tweets related to the crisis as possible. Tweets were searched and collected based on different combinations the following keywords, not necessarily hashtags: germanwings OR 4U9525, bürgermeister OR oberbürgermeister OR landrat, references to (the name of) the mayors and/or the name of the town where victims came from. These combinations were used to ensure that all tweets about mayors could be captured. Since tweets are limited to 140 characters per tweet, users might only refer to political figures by their surname or their position. Therefore we searched for a combination of the two, but also for each term separately. In total we collected 679 tweets for analysis, including 9 tweets from one affected mayor. Of this total number, 511 were re-tweets leaving us with 168 unique tweets mentioning mayors or cities. Since mayors are the heads of local governments, actions taken by cities – such as memorial services – were also included into the analyzed tweets.

3.2.1.3. Facebook

As mentioned earlier, German social media users turn to Facebook – rather than Twitter – much more frequently to express their views or share content they find relevant. This has also been evident in our findings. Even though only a handful of mayors utilized Facebook or any social media source to be in contact with citizens, those who did use social media

\(^4\) We used this technique, because we were unable to find a free-of-charge software provider similar to Coosto to search for German Tweets.

\(^5\) A re-tweet is similar to a tweet, but consists of a message of a person (user I), which has been copied and resent by another Twitter user (User II) (Jong, Dücker & van der Velden, 2016).
used Facebook rather than Twitter\(^6\). Response rates or acknowledgement from the public were also much higher on Facebook compared to Twitter.

The Facebook search for relevant content eventually turned out to be more complex than anticipated. This is partially due to the available privacy settings and terms of privacy. There is a difference between private and public profiles available to users. The public cannot freely access private accounts, if the user does not allow it. On the other hand, public accounts are freely accessible to the public. As mentioned earlier the search was limited to the mayors’ (private/public) Facebook profiles only, since they are considered more reliable in the information they publicized. Moreover, especially public profiles could reach a larger audience than normal private citizen accounts and offered a large number of comments from the public, which were evaluated by the researchers.

To find the relevant public figures, they were searched by their names. Some mayors had multiple accounts and all of them were searched for any status updates, pictures or other forms of communication concerning the crash of 4U9525. A total of 33 posts were collected from six different mayors, whose communities were affected by the crash. All 33 posts gathered more than 7,600 likes in total\(^7\), with the lowest number for an individual post being two likes and the highest number of likes for a post being over 1,700. Additionally the 33 posts received a total of 431 unique comments.

3.3. Analyses and coding procedures

To be able to assess and evaluate the perceived performance of mayors, three possible values were assigned to the content of the newspaper articles and social media entries, as was done in the Jong et al study. Those values were either neutral, negative or positive. Those articles or entries that only quoted a mayor or stated the mayors’ own opinions, but were without any indication of approval or disapproval from journalists or the public, were coded as “neutral”.

Furthermore, articles were considered to be neutral in cases where the appearance or presence of a mayor was mentioned by the press or public, but stated without any

\(^6\) 14 mayors utilized Facebook compared to three, who used Twitter. Of those 14, five used Facebook in relation to the crash of 4U9525. Only one mayor used Twitter in relation with the disaster.

\(^7\) A user can like the post of another user to express approval or agreement with the content of the post
interpretation or normative terminology. "The mayor attended a church service held for the victims", which is a factual sentence reflecting no judgment or interpretation on the mayor’s presence, was coded as neutral for example. Articles or entries that were coded as “positive” generally included some positive interpretation or judgment when the role of the mayors’ was discussed. Articles or entries that included a mayor being moved or shocked by the crash were coded positive. Those articles that were labeled as “negative” included criticism and disapproval of mayors’ handling of the crisis. Sample quotes of each possible value are also included in the results section.

Two researchers independently rated the sets of newspaper articles, tweets and Facebook posts. The agreement between them was acceptable. Cohen’s Kappa (0.916 for the newspaper articles, 0.924 for tweets and 0.963 for Facebook posts) was calculated with the help of using Vassar Stats. Kappa values between 0.81 and 1 are generally considered as almost perfect agreement (see also Riff, Lacy & Fico, 2014). Given that a high level of inter-rater reliability could be established, the scores of the author were employed for the analysis of the obtained data. A full list of all identified newspaper articles, Facebook posts and tweets – including the coded versions of the data – can be obtained from the author.
4. Newspaper and social media results

4.1. Results newspaper articles

A total of 159 articles were found for stage I, 38 articles for stage II, and 17 for stage III. Generally it could be observed that most articles were neutral with an overall number of 150 (69.76%). The second largest group consisted of positive articles with a number of 62 (28.84%). Negative articles were the smallest group with 3 articles (1.4%) in total.

![Newspaper articles total](image)

**Figure I**, GermanWings related newspaper articles between 24th March 2015 and 8th April 2016

4.1.1. Articles during stage I

As with all other stages, most articles in the first stage were labeled as “neutral” (112; 70.44%). Newspapers covered press conferences, social gatherings such as church services, memorials and also the repatriation of the remains of the student group from Haltern. Evidently, newspaper articles had more room to report about the mayors’ different activities, since there are fewer limitations length-wise in a newspaper article than in a tweet (140 signs). The following quotes are chosen from newspaper articles that covered
the incident and its aftermath. Both are neutral in their tone and do not contain any interpretation by the authors:

“My condolences go out to the family and friends of the young woman. Consolation can barely be given at this moment, but our sympathies can potentially give a little bit of strength – though we know that the strength the family now needs is hard to find.” (Lord Mayor of Leipzig, Burkhard Jung, BILD on 28.03.2015)

“It is the blackest day in the history of our city.” (Mayor of Haltern, Bodo Klimpel, in die Zeit ( Hecking & Tatje) on 09.04.2015)

Positive articles in the first stage (45; 28.3%) included observations, interpretations and judgements of citizens and journalists about the activities of mayors and/or their behavior. These articles were mostly about the emotions mayors showed during speeches concerning the crash. ‘Before it started, the atmosphere became emotional: The Lord Mayor asked the band and the audience for a minute of silence for the victims of the GermanWings flight, who lost their lives in the crash in the French Alps on Tuesday. “So many people had to die, because someone believed, he had to end his life – that is not okay.”’ (Lord Mayor of Frankfurt, Peter Feldmann, Frankfurter Neue Presse 28.03.2015).

Another positive labeled article concerns the press conference Bodo Klimpel gave on the day of the crash. He was described as emotional with tears in his eyes when he spoke of the “blackest day in the history of the city” after learning that a school class from Haltern was onboard the crashed plane. The mayor of Düsseldorf was also described as emotional and willing to help the families of the victims quickly and un-bureaucratically:

“The mayors, department heads, faction leaders, administrative officials and many other people in Düsseldorf gathered yesterday at exactly twelve o’clock in the foyer of the town hall around Lord Mayor Geisel. A minute of silence for the victims of the plane crash. For sixty seconds everything stood still. Then Geisel sits down at a table covered in a heavy velvet cloth, candle, wreath and condolences book. He writes long sentences on the paper, halts for a moment, breathes deeply and continues writing. Eventually he gets up, and it’s the others’ turn. The line is long. Later he answers questions on the town hall square. It is raining, and big drops fall on the
man’s nose. But Geisel doesn’t realize, he speaks absent-minded. “The city is like paralyzed, everyone feels touched by this tragedy”, he says. When he describes meeting the relatives of the victims on the previous day, his voice nearly breaks: “Sometimes it helps to just put your arm around someone and suffer with them.” […] The Lord Mayor cancelled his business trip to Israel. “When a catastrophe like this happens, you cannot simply continue with the normal program”, says Geisel. If there will be – in agreement with the country – a large memorial ceremony for the victims, the Lord Mayor was not yet able to tell on Wednesday. The fact is: Geisel wants fast and un-bureaucratic help for the families of the victims. “I am available for personal discussions. Though every family handles a catastrophe like this differently, therefore we need to assess this on a case to case basis.” He said’ (on Thomas Geisel, Der Westen (Wappner), 25.03.2015)

As mentioned earlier there were only three negative articles found in total concerning mayors’ performance in the aftermath of the crisis. Two of these were published during the first stage of the crisis’ aftermath (1.26%). One of these concerned the planned memorial ceremony in Cologne. The mayor and city were criticized for the surrounding area of the Cologne Dome, which was the location of the ceremony, to look like a dump.

‘Critics remarked smugly that now everyone knew what the Dome city truly looked like..’ (Rheinische Post (Korn), 14.04.2015)

Another negative article consisted of an interview published in the Süddeutsche Zeitung (28 March 2015). The interviewee there criticizes the fact that a politician in Montabaur breached the privacy of the co-pilot’s family by publicly stating that he was living with his parents in Montabaur. Furthermore it is criticized that the mayor of Haltern held a press conference about the crash on the same day of the catastrophe and that the public prosecutor’s office painted a complete picture of the crash after only receiving minimal amounts of information.

‘Why must a politician from Montabaur explain that the copilot lived with his parents, without any consideration for his privacy? Why does the mayor of Haltern hold a press conference right away? Most boisterous is however the office of the public prosecutor,
who painted a complete picture out of little information.’ (Süddeutsche Zeitung (von der Hagen), 28.03.2015)

4.1.2. Articles during stage II

For stage II 23 articles were coded as “neutral” (60.52%), 1 as “negative” (2.63%), and 14 as “positive” (36.84%). In this group most neutral articles were about the opening of a memorial site in Haltern to commemorate the deceased and Angela Merkel’s visit to the school in Haltern on 20th October 2015, which lost a large group of students in the plane crash, to visit and speak to friends and families of the victims.

‘“The disaster will forever be part of our city”, said Haltern’s mayor Bodo Klimpel during a visit to the memorial site, which the city had established at the communal graveyard. For Klimpel himself, the memorial site is also the expression of a promise to the victims’ families: “We will never forget the dead.”’ (Hamburger Abendblatt, 12.08.2015)

‘Some people in the streets believe that Merkel came too late. But Haltern’s mayor Klimpel (CDU) holds against this opinion that through visits like this the grieving process will never find closure. “The children have only been dead for seven months, we cannot yet talk of closure”, he said. “We have always said that we do not want to forget the children, and that is extremely important for the parents. And our chancellor agreed with that.”’ (Hamburger Abendblatt (Wolf), 21.10.2015)

The positive articles were mostly about the repatriation of the remains of 44 victims amongst others those of the students and teachers from the school of Haltern. The mayor of Haltern accompanied the families of the victims from Haltern to Düsseldorf to receive the remains of their loved ones. He also accompanied them back to Haltern and later attended the funerals of the victims. Articles kept mentioning that he accompanied the parents during this difficult time and cared for/about them. Furthermore, many newspapers mentioned that after his Easter vacation Bodo Klimpel met with the parents of the deceased children in order to help them with practical matters and aid them to find a way
back from grievance to normalcy as far as they could do so. (die Welt (Linnhoff), 15.04.2015)

‘A never-ending convoy of snow-white hearses drove through Haltern a few days ago. Mayor Bodo Klimpel’s voice was shaking when he – representative of the victims’ families – tried to describe the atmosphere. Every obsequy was dramatic in its own way, he says. He speaks about clergymen, who were so in tears that they found themselves unable to speak. Of hundreds, who had to say good-bye to their friends at their open graves. Of a mother, who kept stroking her daughter’s coffin continuously during the funeral. “I cannot get those pictures out of my head”, says Klimpel.’ (Abendzeitung München (Ebener & Dame), 25.06.2015)

The only negative, yet important article found in this timeframe consists of an interview that was conducted by the Mitteldeutsche Zeitung with the father of Juliane Nowak, a young woman, who also died in the crash. In the interview he said that while some political figures offered their condolences and also help, others only did this publicly on Twitter or on the news, but never actually contacted the family itself to ask them about their needs or offer their sympathy. Therefore the family found out about this promised help and sympathies through other people and they were shocked, sad and ruminative about these actions, because to them they were pure show and pretense. Furthermore he was saddened by the fact that neither the lord mayor of Leipzig nor Halle (where the family originates from) commented on the death of their daughter or offer their sympathies to the family. In this context he did not mention the support other victims’ families received compared to him. Therefore the negative response solely reflected on the shortcomings of those political leaders he had expected to receive support from.

“Also the lord mayors of Leipzig and Halle did not contact us, neither concerning the death of Juliane nor did we receive a reaction concerning our initiative.” (Mitteldeutsche Zeitung (Knothe), 18.05.2015)
4.1.3. Articles during stage III

As with all other stages the articles in stage three were also mostly neutral (14; 82.35%). Most of them discussed the anniversary of the plane crash in Haltern am See and how families coped with the loss of their loved ones.

“I wish for the parents that they can find the peace that they need in order to be able to cope with this incredible sadness and pain. I hope that they will find a way to bear all of this.” Said Haltern’s Mayor Bodo Klimpel. Normalcy – like before the disaster – will not be possible anymore.’ (Bergische Morgenpost, Rheinische Post, etc. 22.03.2016)

There were three articles that were classified as “positive” (17.65%) in the third stage, but one stood out amongst the three.

‘Bodo Klimpel received a lot of high-ranking visitors this year. The mayor intercepted all inquiries, in order for the parents to be able to grieve in peace. [...] Klimpel does not want to talk about normalcy yet. But a form of commonplace bustling has returned. [...] Tourism was not affected by the crisis according to the mayor. Klimpel is 52, for 12 years he has been the mayor. He is a true CDU-member; he participates in all celebrations and taps the first barrel often. He is not a quiet man. But in the past year, he says, he learned to be humble. He, who is used to things running the way he wants them to, now stands on stage sometimes and lets his eyes wander through the rows of people, tries to remember their faces and hopes that they will be there again next year. His son is a student at the Joseph-König-Gymnasium, one year below the class that was ripped apart by the catastrophe. A while ago students got their half-year reports. His son’s grades could have been better. Before, the arguments about grades were a burden to him. As stupid as it sounds, says Klimpel, nowadays he considers the discussion to be a privilege.’ (Welt am Sonntag (Kensche), 13.03.2016)

This article was classified as positive, because it shows that the crash has not solely changed the lives of the victims’ families radically, but also the lives of everyone else surrounding them, including the mayor. He describes how the disaster has not solely
changed his tasks as a mayor, but also how it has affected and changed him as a person and his relationship with the community.

For the third stage no negative articles could be found. However, there was an article, which was not included in the final selection – since it was not technically published by a newspaper – that included an interview with a bereaved mother. She said in the interview that those families from Haltern received a lot of support and were able to support each other in their grief. According to her, families from other areas did not have these opportunities (dpa, 2016).
4.2. Twitter findings

A total of 679 tweets relating to mayors or cities and the crash of GermanWings 4U9525, were found. In the analysis tweets about mayors were also included, whose communities were not directly affected by the crash, but were mentioned in relation to the disaster regardless. Overall, most of the 679 tweets were coded as neutral (610; 89.84%). Positive tweets were the second largest group with 66 tweets in total (9.72%). Lastly, there were only three tweets coded as negative (0.44%) 8.

![Tweets Relating to 4U9525 Crash and Mayors/Cities](image)

**Figure II.** GermanWings related tweets between March 24th, 2015 and April 8th, 2016.

4.2.1. Tweets during stage I

The largest number of tweets on the GermanWings disaster was sent during the first week subsequent to the crash. A second, albeit smaller, increase of tweets occurred during the week of the national memorial service held at the Cologne Dome on 17th April 2015. In the first stage tweets were overwhelmingly neutral (602 tweets; 89.99%). Those neutral tweets mainly included mayors confirming that citizens from their municipalities were onboard the GermanWings plane or mayors expressing their shock and sympathy. In the subsequent days, tweets announced mayors’ opening or signing public condolences registries, their shock about the cause of the crash, and local memorial services. Below are

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8 A list of all relevant tweets can be obtained from the author
four examples of neutral tweets that were published between the day of the crash and the national memorial ceremony on 17 April 2015. They are followed by two positive examples and two negative examples.

“The mayor of Haltern confirms that 16 students were onboard the plane.
#Germanwings #4U9252” (@SWRinfo, 24 March 2015)

“Flags are at half-mast in the city @Duesseldorf for #Germanwing-flight #4U9525”
(@welt, 24 March 2015)

“Niermann: ‘We have expressed our condolences to the affected families.’ The commune wants to give assistance. 4U9525” (@MT_Lokales 25 March 2015)

“Flags are at half-mast at the dome in #Cologne. I’m going inside now. Phone needs to be turned off, understandably so. #Germanwings” (@SebastianReddig, 17 April 2015)

Positive tweets (64 tweets; 9.57%) generally referred to mayors’ emotionality during press conferences, their support to the next of kin and the way they fulfilled crisis tasks.

“’I only saw real sympathy and empathy from the tie-less mayor of #Haltern’ #4u9525 http://t.co/M9vuGXIxLk” (@kinra 25 March 2015)

One message was directly addressed to the lord mayor of Düsseldorf, Thomas Geisel:

“@Duesseldorf well done, @OB_ThomasGeisel ! Fast and expressive sympathy! #Germanwings #4U9525” (@SchererRhein 24 March 2015)

Negative tweets (3 tweets; 0.44%) were mostly about one mayor from the city mayor of Montabaur and one was about the mayor of Haltern. Apart from that no other negative tweets related to mayors and the tragedy could be found.

“One would actually expect the city mayor @GabiWieland to rally for her citizens and criticize the #madrush on #montabaur” (@mikel125, 30 March 2015)

“Why does the mayor of #Haltern actually need to hold press conferences every day? #Germanwings #4U9525” (@CTautz, 26 March 2015)
4.2.2. Stage II Tweets
In the second stage there is a sharp decline in tweets concerning the crash of GermanWings 4U9525 and mayors’ activities related to the tragedy. For the period from April 25th 2015 until October 21st 2015 (Stage II) eight tweets were collected. It was considered surprising that there were only so few tweets related to the crash and mayors activities, but it was hypothesized that it might be due to the fact that the repatriation of the remains largely happened outside of the public’s eyes, the cause of the crash was already established within days of the tragedy and mayors’ activities, such as memorial services were largely confined to the first stage. There were a total of three unique tweets posted in May and June 2015. Two of them were coded as neutral (66.67%) and one as positive (33.33%). All three examples can be found below with the two neutral being followed by the positive tweet.

“After the crash of the GermanWings plane: BV Mengede plants memorial trees for the deceased married couple http://t.co/ClppkKuHgz” (@RN_DORTMUND, 1 May 2015)

“Haltern: Mayor Klimpel: ‘We are happy that the time of waiting is over.’ #4U9525” (@engelberg_ms, 10 June 2015)

The tweet, which was coded as positive, referred to the mayor of Haltern, who – according to the author – moved many people across Germany with his authentic and emotional press conferences and the speech he held during the memorial service at the St. Sixtus Church in Haltern⁹.

“Today 16 coffins will arrive in #Haltern. Why the mayor of the grieving community moves so many: https://t.co/FgzMvjbdZA #4U9525” (@NicolaKarnick, 9 June 2015)

4.2.3. Tweets during stage III
While many tweets were published during the week of the disaster’s anniversary, only two tweets were posted in relation to mayors during stage III. One of these tweets was neutral (50%) and the other was coded as positive (50%).

⁹ https://medium.com/@NicolaKarnick/nahbar-in-der-trag%C3%B6die-88a9d9594ede#.hd2vkvskl
The neutral tweet included a quote from Haltern’s mayor, Bodo Klimpel.

“Haltern: Mayor Klimpel on the anniversary: ‘We have moved closer together. It is beneficial to grieve together.’ #4U9525” (@engelberg_ms, 24 March 2016)

The positive tweet concerned a photography exhibition that the city of Mülheim organized in honor of one of their citizens, who lost his life in the crash.

“@Muelheim_Ruhr honors #Germanwings-victim with a photography exhibition. https://t.co/TSOn0Y3w8K” (@BILD_Ruhrgebiet, 14 March 2016)
4.3. Facebook findings

A total of 33 posts were found that were published by mayors on Facebook, either on their personal profiles or on their public ones. All posts combined gathered a total of 447 comments. The comments were mostly neutral (257 comments; 57.49%) or did not explicitly concern mayors and their performance – and were therefore coded as neutral – and/or they only expressed condolences to the affected families. However, there was also a large amount of very positive comments (188 comments; 42.06%), especially in the case of Bodo Klimpel, but also Thomas Geisel and Erwin Esser.

There were very few negative comments on mayors’ behavior or actions in relation to the plane crash. Only three could be found in total, however one of them was deleted since the initial screening of comment sections and is therefore not included in the examples (0.45%). A larger number of comments expressing negative opinions about other political figures, e.g. those who travelled to the sight of the crash, were observed.

![Facebook Comments on Mayors' Profiles Concerning 4U9525](image)

**Figure III.** Facebook comments about the GermanWings tragedy on mayors’ profiles between 24\(^{th}\) March 2015 and 8\(^{th}\) April 2016

4.3.1. Stage I – Facebook comments

Nearly all, but one, comments were published during the first stage after the plane crash. The majority was neutral (257; 57.62%), but there were also a large number of comments
that praised mayors for their compassion and efforts in the aftermath of the disaster (188; 42.16%). One comment was coded as negative (0.22%).

A selection of three neutral comments, three positive ones and the negative comment analyzed in stage I below, are included.

“I find this okay. These politicians are the representatives of the people. And in their function I also want to see “the elected” at events, like this one, to represent all of us. PS: @Steph: don’t always complain about everything. Why can’t you/someone just accept something the way it is?” (Facebook user, 17 April 2015)

“All the best and god’s blessings for you, dear Mr Klimpel” (Facebook user, 10 April 2015)

“We are shaken and deeply saddened by the grief that this catastrophe has brought upon your city. Our deepest condolences to the families and friends of the victims.” (Facebook user, 27 March 2015)

Those comments were coded as positive, which included praise and/or acknowledgements for the mayors and/or their actions in the aftermath of the plane crash. Three positive comments from three different mayors’ profiles were selected.

Bodo Klimpel:

“Surely I wasn’t the only one, who found your words, which reached most of us via TV, most kind and compassionate in the face of this catastrophe. Thank you for that. Haltern can be proud of such a mayor.” (Facebook user, 28 March 2015)

The second comment that was chosen to be included, was written by the father of a victim underneath a picture that Erwin Esser and shared on his profile page. The comment was directed at the mayor.

“We thank you for the great concern.” (Facebook user, 28 March 2015)
Thomas Geisel:

“... When did our city ever have such a lord mayor? I am proud again to be a Düsseldorfer! Thank you Mr. Geisel for your empathetic/humanitarian efforts, not only in these sorrowful hours!” (Facebook user, 24 March 2015)

Only one comment was found that was in a way negative towards the mayor of Haltern. It was neither a direct attack, nor any other direct negative reflection on the mayor or his work, but it had a very strong negative undertone. The commenter insinuated that the mayor only cared about (and focused the attention of the media on) those 16 students from his community who died and disregarded all the other 134 victims of the crash.

“It wasn’t just 16 of your people who died, but 134 others as well. Think about that.” (Facebook user, 30 March 2015)

4.3.2. Stage II – Facebook comments
During stage II only one comment could be found, which was negative (1; 100%) and targeted the mayor of Düsseldorf.

“How hypocritical to attempt to gain political capital from a tragic event... You should grieve in private, but not as a ‘political person’ on a public page... It is way too apparent what you are trying to achieve.” (Facebook user, 13 June 2015)

4.3.3. Stage III – Facebook posts
In stage III no relevant Facebook posts could be found on mayors’ profiles. This was surprising, especially in the case of Bodo Klimpel, since it was expected that there would be an anniversary (post) to commemorate the victims from Haltern at least, since the disaster had a large impact on the small town. Similar to Twitter there was a large number of posts on Facebook to commemorate the victims of the crash by individual users, but none of them was of relevance to the research question.

It was hypothesized that Mr. Klimpel did not publish any official statements on Facebook relating to the anniversary of the crash, because he was involved in the organization of
upcoming memorial services for the Haltern victims. It is also assumed that the other mayors did not publish any content on their profiles, because the crash did not have a large impact on their communities and therefore a commemoration post was considered irrelevant or could have even backfired in seeming too politically charged and/or hypocritical.

4.4. Impact in Haltern am See
In both, the crash of MH17 and GermanWings 9525, two small towns were faced with the highest number of victims. These were Hilversum and Haltern am See. Both towns held local memorials and erected special memorial sights for the local victims (Hamburger Abendblatt, 2015; Pieter, 2016). Yet, the mayor of Haltern am See became a very important public political figure in the aftermath of the crisis compared to the mayor of Hilversum. Social media as well as conventional media praised the mayor of Haltern am See for his emotional press conferences, his support of the victims in his community – for example by speaking at memorial services and accompanying the families of victims to receive the remains of their loved ones – and his overall behavior and actions in the aftermath of the tragic plane crash. The only negative reaction that he was indirectly faced with was the critique from some users that Haltern was given too much attention compared to the other communities that had lost members as well. The reactions to the mayor of Hilversum were mixed in that sense that he had called for Putin’s daughter to be expelled from the Netherlands after the downing of MH17 (Jong et al., 2016). He received a great deal of negative feedback for this statement. However, he also received positive feedback for his general behavior towards the victims in his community and for attending each occasion when remains of victims were returned to the Netherlands (Jong et al. 2016). Jong et al. (2016) emphasize this, “we learned that the mayor of Hilversum, even though he was generally criticized on his remarks on Putin’s daughter, was highly appreciated for his visits to the families.” (Jong et al., 2016, p.20)
5. Discussion
The aim of this study was to assess which 4U9525-related activities – or absence of expected activities – of German mayors were mentioned in social media and German newspapers and if and how they were evaluated at different stages during the first year after this disaster. The study focused on German newspapers, as well as Twitter and Facebook as sources of information. Since this research aimed to replicate the research of Jong et al. (2016), it will closely focus on similarities and differences in the findings between their study and this research.

It was interesting to learn that characteristics the public valued in mayors were the same across general and crisis situations. One could expect that other factors such as empathy or even perceived strength could have been expected characteristics of mayors in crisis situations, yet the most valued ones – credibility/authenticity, leadership and close proximity to the community – persisted. In crisis situations this importance is even intensified due to the different framework conditions and the expanded audience. Therefore, the highest priority should be the preservation and stabilization of policymakers’ credibility. Rapid and transparent communication paired with complete information is the best means to ensure that potential accusations or misconceptions cannot manifest themselves in the dominant narrative. In the aftermath of the GermanWings crisis the mayors of Düsseldorf and Haltern am See continuously released information on the proceedings after the initial incident and were willing to discuss information, but did not participate in speculation. Thus, not participating in speculation could be a decisive element for a political leader in order to retain an image as a credible and authentic public leader.

Similar to the MH17 crisis in the Netherlands, mayors involved in the aftermath of the GermanWings 9525 incident, found themselves facing a “distant crisis” and an a-typical disaster. The disaster happened in a different country, yet it had local implications. In locally confined disasters the public performance of a local head of government and the process of political responsibility and accountability assessment seem usually closely connected (Boin and ‘t Hard 2003; Lay, 2009; van Eijk et al. 2012, Jong et al. 2016). However, due to the nature of the events this did not happen in the case of 4U9525. Instead,
mayors faced no “ blame games” – even though there were many on other levels in the chain of responsibility – and they were not held politically accountable concerning evacuation orders, permits or disaster management in general, because the crisis did not happen in their own municipality and therefore outside of the geographic area of their political responsibility. Therefore, unlike colleagues such as former mayor of Duisburg, Adolf Sauerland, who was held publicly responsible in the Loveparade disaster (Bergmann, Isringhaus, & Schwerdtfeger, 2015; Zeit Magazin, 2016) or mayor Ray Nagin of New Orleans, who was blamed for the mismanagement in the preparations for, as well as the response after hurricane Katrina (Littlefield and Quenette, 2007; Farazmand, 2009; Koven, 2010), no mayor was held politically accountable or responsible with regard to the causes of the 4U9525 disaster.

Results of the media and social media analysis show that most activities mayors were involved in were described in a neutral manner, though Facebook was an exception. There, neutral and positive comments nearly equaled each other during the first stage, which was an unexpected finding. It was observed that about 42 percent Facebook comments in the first stage were positive, compared to 9 percent of Tweets and 28 percent of newspaper articles. This was a considerable difference. In most of these cases people took to Facebook to directly thank mayors for their service to the citizens and families involved in the tragedy or they expressed their pride and/or happiness about a mayors’ activities and involvement. The only possible explanation available for this occurrence is that people generally use Facebook to express their personal opinion more frequently, while Twitter and newspaper articles are not necessarily used to convey emotions, but facts, due to their nature. However, this is solely a hypothesis, which needs to be verified by further research. Depending on the mayor, the coding of articles, tweets and Facebook posts in total suggest that society regarded most of their activities as neutral or slightly positive contributions. The reason for this overall neutrality could be the fact that no mayor was directly politically responsible for the disaster. Yet, the absence of political responsibility for the occurrence of the crisis does not result in automatic absence of responsibility in the aftermath. This finding was observed by Arceneaux and Stein (2006) in the aftermath of natural disasters. According to their research, citizens attributed blame out of the desire to
maintain a sense of control in the aftermath of a natural disaster. Even if a local head of government cannot be blamed for the occurrence of such crises, he or she can be held responsible for preparations and responses to the disaster. Consequently, it suggests that mayors’ performance is evaluated even in situations where they have no direct political responsibility. However, it is not only direct political responsibility and actions that politicians are evaluated for, but also the way in which they present themselves in context of a crisis. This is illustrated in a study by De Bussy and Paterson (2012) on the crisis leadership styles of political leaders during the Queensland floods. Based on the evaluation of 700 tweets, De Bussy and Paterson found that former Queensland Premier Anna Bligh was perceived as a charismatic and inspirational political leader, since she displayed emotion in regards to the floods, but also in terms of people’s resilience to the crisis. Contrary to her, former Australian Prime Minister Gillard was described as robotic and rehearsed in her communication style. Consequently, it is not possible to explain why the majority of newspaper articles and tweets were coded as ‘neutral’, since political leaders’ actions and behaviours tend to be critically evaluated by the public and media.

One factor in the case of GermanWings 9525 could be that the crisis did not affect German communities in the same way natural disasters do, since there was no physical destruction of infrastructure, houses or other facilities. Consequently, those who were not directly affected by the disaster through the loss of a loved one were able to move on from the crisis rather rapidly. They were also able to limit their exposure to the crisis, if they intended to. Correspondingly, since there was no necessity of rebuilding any physical damages, the process of normalcy could take over relatively soon after the initial shock. Therefore, the nature of the crisis could be a key factor in explaining the different portrayals and expectations of mayors in the aftermath of crises.

An alternative explanation that was also offered by Jong et al. (2016) was that ‘neutral’ articles or tweets might not necessarily reflect the underlying emotions of the author. They hypothesized that people, who attended memorial gatherings, in particular would feel social pressure to be either neutral or positive (Jong et al., 2016). A similar trend in German newspapers and tweets could be observed, which were all coded either neutral or positive. This phenomenon could be observed even more strongly on Facebook, where comments
were overwhelmingly positive, compared to the other examined media sources. However, this neutrality and positivity could be observed, whether authors attended the memorial services or not. Therefore, the hypothesis of Jong et al. that those, who attended a memorial service, could feel social pressure to evaluate it in a certain way could neither be corroborated nor refuted. It is also possible that users found it “easier” to share positive and encouraging feelings compared to negative ones. However, this does not satisfactorily explain the limited number of negative comments, articles and tweets overall Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen & Carter (2015) found that the main purpose of social media – particularly Instagram – at funerals was to signal to one’s presence and emotional circumstances to one’s social network and wider audience. Consequently, the proof of being present was more pertinent than the experience of the situation itself. While this explanation could hold true for social media, it does not explain the fact that journalists did not cover the situation more accurately, if their experiences were negative, unless social pressure also applied to them. In this context, Hearsum (2012) found in the analysis of the coverage of Amy Winehouse’s death in the British press that journalists did cover negative experiences. This suggests that social pressure does not necessarily apply to journalists. Therefore, the experiences with mayors in the aftermath of the GermanWings disaster could have been written down in the manner they were also felt and underlying experiences were simply not negative, at least not in public and social pressure did not play a role in their experience of the memorial services.

In the tragic downing of MH17, one mayor did not attend a memorial service and instead continued his vacation, which caused a lot of negative attention in the press and on Twitter. Therefore Jong et al. (2016) hypothesized that people expect a local head of government to participate in certain activities and fulfill defined roles in the aftermath of a crisis. As previously mentioned, communities expect a mayor to show certain desirable characteristics, such as credibility and authenticity, being a good political leader and being involved with his/her constituency. These expectations also hold true and are even emphasized in the face of a crisis. For example in the aftermath of the GermanWings crash, the mayor of Düsseldorf was praised by users on Facebook for canceling a business trip to Israel and instead “staying” with his constituency (Wappner, 2015), and the mayor of
Haltern was continuously thanked for his leadership skills, care for his community and credibility in the aftermath of the GermanWings disaster. Together with the neutral stance towards other German and Dutch mayors, who attended memorials in the aftermath of both plane crashes, this suggests that mayors are expected to fulfill certain “duties” in the aftermath of on ‘a-typical’ crisis, such as being present in the community and supporting its members in their grief.

The results of the (social) media analyses confirmed that activities of public meaning making and remembrance are considered most important in the aftermath of crises.

“Where sense making, decision making and learning are dominant tasks within the walls of a crisis center, meaning making and terminating are more outward oriented” (Jong et al. 2016, p. 17). The presented activities – such as memorial services, press conferences, community gatherings, and establishment of memorial sites – communicated the broader impacts of the crisis to citizens, media and other stakeholders involved (Jong at al., 2016; Boin, ‘t Hart, Stern & Sundelius, 2005). These tasks portray situations in which mayors and other local leaders appear in the public and political arena. “Meaning making” has often a highly symbolic function in crisis situations, since its activities fulfill people’s need for guidance and direction (Boin, Kuipers & Overdijk, 2013). In the aftermath of the GermanWings disaster, the public perspective reflects the importance of the role of mayors in finding words to describe the collective impact a crisis had, especially during occasions such as social gatherings (Jong et al., 2016).

In conformity with the results of Jong et al. (2016) this analysis identified the importance of what Kofman Bos, ‘t Hart & Ullberg (2005) refer to as “remembering”, which is considered to be a part of meaning-making. According to their research, “remembering” consists of publicly acknowledging that tragic events are traumatic experiences for victims, responders and other involved stakeholders, as well as responding to their desire that the community should ‘never forget’. The local memorials, the national memorial on 17 April 2015, the first anniversary and local memorial sites in Haltern am See are all examples of “remembering” in which mayors either took the lead in their municipalities, or joined a larger public event to represent their community.
Besides the activities mayors were involved in from a public perspective, some were also involved on a more private level. Bodo Klimpel and Thomas Geisel both offered their direct and un-bureaucratic support to the bereaved families from their municipalities, which was a less visible role but presumably highly appreciated (Wappner, 2015; Linnhoff, 2015; dpa, 2016). Generally, public leaders are warned to step into a more private role, since they can fall prey to their own unrealistic promises to victims (Boin and ‘t Hart, 2003). According to the identified articles, posts and tweets, on the public stage there was only the interview with a victim’s father that suggested that some local political heads’ involvement was purely symbolic and used by them for their own publicity. Yet, these politicians were not mayors. Those activities and promises by mayors, who were involved, were not evaluated as symbolic or unrealistic, at least not on a public stage.

It was surprising how little negative articles, tweets and posts were found regarding the GermanWings disaster. In the aftermath of the MH17 disaster, some commentators voiced the opinion that the attention on the crisis was “too much” and out of proportion (Jong et al., 2016). This phenomenon was largely absent in the aftermath of the GermanWings disaster even though coverage of the issue was also very high, especially in the direct aftermath. Therefore German commentators could have easily voiced similar feelings of “over-coverage” as well. Even the mayor of Montabaur, who had revealed that the co-pilot had lived there with his parents, received relatively little negative feedback for her remarks. In comparison, the mayor of Hilversum, who had called for the expulsion of Putin’s daughter in the aftermath of the MH17 disaster, received extensive negative feedback for his opinion. Most of those, which were coded negative, discussed the breach of privacy of the perpetrator and his family by the mayor of Montabaur. The responses in tweets and articles suggest that people expect a mayor to protect and shield her/his community from any intrusion by news media and the general public, even when that citizen is considered responsible for a disaster. Otherwise the only negative article discussing a mayor’s failure to deliver a certain action was the neglect of the mayors of Halle and Leipzig to contact the family of one victim, who had lived in both cities before her death (Knothe, 2015).
Compared to other plane crashes that were caused by human failure or deliberation, this disaster involved very little speculation, since the official narrative including the cause and series of events was published within days of the crisis.

Judging from the results of the analyses, mayors appear to have made important contributions on the public and private level in the aftermath of the GermanWings disaster. German mayors are usually not highly involved in support and healing processes for affected citizens. Professionals in spiritual care and psychology, as well as victim support groups generally support healing and restoration processes after a disaster in Germany. However, in the GermanWings disaster some mayors offered support on the private level, which was appreciated by the victims’ families and general society. This private support should however not be considered the norm. As Boin and ‘t Hart (2003) pointed out, public leaders are warned to step into a more private role, since they can fall prey to their own unrealistic promises to victims. Therefore a cautious approach is to be advised. While “meaning making” and “remembering” have largely a public dimension, support with practical issues and personal visits are of a more private nature. However, interviews with family members afterwards elevate these encounters to the public sphere (dpa, 2016). In some areas private and public meet, when a mayor intervenes in certain situations for example, like holding local memorials, attending funerals or acting as a spokesperson for victims’ families in the direct aftermath of a disaster (Hamburger Abendblatt, 2015).

Lastly, it was found that coverage on the 4U9525 incident disappeared relatively fast in regular media – and even more so in social media – after the national memorial service in Cologne. This seemed surprising, since the incident was highly discussed, not only due to the tragic circumstances, but also for the debate on patient confidentiality in relation to airplane personnel and the “two-person-cockpit-rule”. However, the cause was quickly established after the investigation began and the recovery and repatriation of remains could proceed without many delays. This could potentially serve as a reason, which coverage decreased so rapidly, since there were seemingly no new developments to report or discuss. Though the coverage spiked slightly when the first remains of victims were returned to Germany in June, when Angela Merkel visited the Joseph-König Gymnasium in Haltern am See in October, and when the anniversary of the tragedy approached. Besides
these dates the coverage was essentially non-existent. While the coverage was expected to decrease significantly within the first weeks after the crisis, it was not expected to become so minor, especially during important events such as the return of the remains or the first anniversary of the disaster. This comparatively little coverage also stood in stark contrast to the high coverage the MH17 incident received in the Netherlands, even in the third stage.

There are multiple possible explanations that could illustrate this phenomenon. One is the size of population in both studied countries. Thus, the impact of a plane crash, which nearly killed 200 Dutch citizens, might just have caused a larger overall shock on the Dutch society than the crash of 4U9525 had on the German society with 72 citizens being killed. Yet, this does not explain why the coverage faded so rapidly even in local or regional newspapers.

Another explanation could be that the investigation and repatriation of remains in the aftermath of the GermanWings disaster took a lot less time than in the aftermath of the MH17 crisis. Therefore the entire process from the initial tragedy to the burial of the victims was concluded in a shorter timeframe. Furthermore, the MH17 disaster is a much more controversial crash than the GermanWings one, since the incident happened over a conflict zone, the perpetrators were never found and the remains of the crash were initially not accessible to investigators. Even now, there are still many unanswered questions in relation to the crash, which might make it more difficult to find closure for those directly affected, but also the Dutch society. Therefore, public interest in the MH17 disaster might have been higher due to its causes and length of the process compared to the GermanWings crash, in which the cause was identified shortly after the disaster and the recovery and repatriation of the remains could take place without severe interferences. However, this explanation still does not satisfactorily explain the rapid reduction in news coverage and (possibly) general interest. There are certainly other factors that might have also influenced the coverage on both crashes in the respective countries. Cultural differences could certainly have played a role in this. Yet, the German and Dutch societies are generally perceived as quite similar, which could also be observed in the actions and behaviours of some mayors in the affected communities in both countries. Therefore an all-encompassing satisfactory solution to the question could not be found.
6. Limitations and conclusion

As mentioned in the objectives of this study, research in the field of local crisis management in the event of an international disaster appears to be limited and further exploration into the area is necessary to validate current findings and draw reliable conclusions. Though the findings presented in this study are similar to those of the research of Jong et al. (2016) and consequently offer a better claim to validity of these findings, more studies on similar and dissimilar types of disasters are necessary to aid in the understanding of the ‘modus operandi’ of mayors in and after a-typical crises. Research to validate our findings and conclusions could study other similar incidents of human-caused airplane disasters, such as the terrorist attack on Metrojet Flight 9268 in 2015, the pilot-suicides in the cases of LAM Mozambique Airlines flight 470 in 2013 and SilkAir Flight 185 in 1997, and the crash of EgyptAir Flight 804 in 2016 or possibly the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 in 2014. These researches could aid in future crisis management processes after a-typical disasters. It does not necessarily have to focus solely on local political leaders, but it could also focus on the perspective of airlines in relation to crisis management and victim expectations in the aftermath of air traffic crises. The research could further aim to investigate, whether the findings that were discussed in this thesis and the study of Jong et al. also hold true for other countries or regions or are even globally applicable. The likelihood of international disasters having an effect on the local level or even causing a local crisis is ever increasing considering the rapid development of globalization. Research in the area does not necessarily have to be confined to airplane disaster, but terrorist attacks could also be researched in this context. Some of the recent terrorist attacks in Europe claimed the lives of many foreigners and could give further insight into the “modus operandi” of mayors in the aftermath of disasters. In this context it might even be beneficial to contrast the modus operandi of mayors after different types of disasters to examine similarities and differences in actions taken and their perception by the public. The resulting findings could then be collected in a manual for crisis management for local heads of government.
A limitation of this study is the one-sided approach to the issue. The perspective, from which the crisis was investigated, was that of German (social) media. Other important perspectives are those of the victims and also those of the involved mayors. Their perception of the aftermath of the disaster could vary very strongly from that of outsiders and therefore should potentially be investigated in other studies and future research. These could further our understanding of necessary actions by local political leaders in the aftermath of (a-typical) disasters and even help to improve victim support.

One limitation in this study was the employment of Twitter and the inability to utilize software similar to Costoo like Jong et al. did, since it cannot be confirmed with full accuracy whether all tweets concerning GW 4U9525 and mayors’ performance could be found and extracted. It is also possible that some tweets had been deleted by users before the beginning of the study-period. It was decided to utilize Facebook next to Twitter, since Germans use the former to a much larger extent\(^\text{10}\). This decision certainly had a positive influence on the research, since it offered an increased insight into the evaluation of mayors’ performance and activities, which Twitter alone would not have provided. The difference in users’ opinion in both social media sources was striking. Therefore a study of multiple social media sources is advised in similar research projects. However, attention should be paid to the user preferences in social media choice, e.g. Dutch nationals utilize Twitter, rather than Facebook. German nationals prefer to use Facebook, which is why it was included in this research.

Not all articles that were published about the incident within the defined timeframe by all German newspapers were included in this research. Some articles were only accessible through paid services and thus unavailable for this research. Even though two search engines were utilized to find relevant newspapers, the possibility exists that not all relevant newspapers were extracted, since some national newspapers were not obtainable through LexisNexis and neither were some local ones. However, the number of articles extracted offered a good overview of debates on mayoral activities.

\(^{10}\) https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/70232/umfrage/soziale-netzwerke---nutzer-pro-monat/
Due to privacy laws and data protection a complete list of all German victims and their area of residence could not be obtained. This complicated the research a lot, since the information retrieved, could only be obtained from secondary informal sources instead of a primary legal document such as an official passenger list. One victim was mentioned nowhere apart from a supposedly original passenger list that was published online after the disaster\textsuperscript{11}. Therefore, it cannot be fully confirmed that the research is complete, since there is a possibility of having missed one affected community. This also displays in the table of affected communities. However, the extensive research across newspapers and social media did not turn up any results in the case of one victim. Consequently, it was hypothesized that he might be from an affected community that lost multiple victims or was after all not a German citizen.

The nature of the GermanWings 9525 crash was a highly unusual kind of crisis from a mayoral point of view. Firstly, the crisis happened hundreds of kilometers away from their municipalities and secondly, it was a fatal disaster caused by deliberate human actions and not by an accident, natural disaster or through technical failure. While in ordinary crisis situations mayors would have to combine several bureaucratic and non-bureaucratic tasks, like heading local crisis teams or using their legislative powers in decision-making processes, this crisis mostly demanded for ‘soft skills’ such as ‘meaning making’, ‘remembering’, and in some cases helping victims’ families in a more private and practical manner. Thus this finding might not be applicable in local crises where a mayor is held responsible for the disaster to a certain extent. For example, in the aftermath of the Loveparade disaster, the victims’ families did not want to receive condolences from the mayor of Duisburg, since he was considered partially responsible for the disaster and did not react emphatically in the direct aftermath of the crisis (Bergmann, Isringhaus, & Schwerdtfeger, 2015; Zeit Magazin, 2016).

From the results of this study and previous research or even unstudied crises (Jong et al. 2016, Lay, 2009; Arceneaux & Stein, 2006; De Bussy & Patterson, 2012), one could conclude that the public role of (local) political leaders in the aftermath of crises can be

\textsuperscript{11} http://www.elperiodico.com/es/noticias/internacional/lista-oficial-pasajeros-4051133
considered a *conditio sine qua non*. A mayor is expected to fulfill tasks of ‘meaning making’ and ‘remembering’, even if these activities are not necessarily reflected with ‘appreciation’ by the public and news media, but are evaluated in a generally neutral manner. The mayors of Haltern am See and Düsseldorf stood out positively for their political performance. However, they also faced the largest numbers of fatalities and therefore their actions were covered in news media more frequently than the performance of other involved mayors, some of which also were mentioned positively in media and social media sources. In contrast, a mayor, who fails to deliver these activities, is easily met with a negative reaction by the press and the general public. This was evident in the study of Jong et al. (2016), however in the GermanWings disaster this phenomenon was absent, since no mayor seemed to have made such a “mistake” or was blamed for it by commentators.

While the public role mayors fulfilled was met with relatively little appreciation – apart from Facebook –, their private role received more positive feedback from victims’ families as evident from interviews, Facebook posts and newspaper articles (dpa, 2016; Ebner & Dame, 2015; Linnhoff, 2015; Wolf, 2015; Kensche, 2016; Wappner, 2015). Therefore it is necessary for mayors not to neglect that essential element of private and pragmatic care in the aftermath of a crisis, even when their role is first and foremost that of a public leader (see Hobfoll et al., 2007). In this regard it would be considered beneficial, if German mayors would embrace the more private role of a ‘citizen father’ in connection with the public role of a ‘first citizen’ of their municipality, similar to Dutch mayors. Further (comparative) research into the appreciation of mayoral activities by the collective community and directly affected victims’ families could also help to extend the understanding of public expectations of local political leaders – such as mayors – and appropriate responses to crisis situations.

As one Facebook post suggested that the mayor of Düsseldorf solely used the crisis for his own reputation, one should not forget that even in crisis situations mayors might have their own goals. According to Olsson (2014) disasters can offer opportunities for communities, organizations and individuals to strengthen their resilience, but also to increase their legitimacy and reputation. Political leaders may want to use their public or even private influence to reach those goals. Yet, more research on the perceived purpose of
public activities ‘meaning making’ and ‘remembering’, as well as private activities such as
‘listening’ to next of kin or offering pragmatic help, and the interaction between both aspects is necessary to be able to draw valid conclusions. Eventually this could provide mayors or political leaders with specific guidance on their expected behavior in crisis situations, whether they are a typical or atypical disaster.
Bibliography


