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Crisis Leadership by Mayors: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Newspapers and Social Media on the MH17 Disaster

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Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 crashed in the Ukraine on 17 July 2014 with 193 Dutch passengers on board. The present study assessed which MH17-related activities (or absence of certain activities) of 54 mayors from the Netherlands were mentioned in (social) media and if and how they were evaluated. Analyses of newspaper articles and social media showed that public ‘meaning making’ and ‘remembering’ by mayors can be considered as a table stake or *conditio sine qua non*. Mayors are expected to speak at memorials and attend community activities. Strong appreciation was however retrieved from victims’ families whenever mayors visited them with a listening ear in the privacy of their homes, demonstrating the role mayors can fulfil as mourners-in-chief in local communities.

1. INTRODUCTION

A Boeing 777-200 passenger plane, operating as Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17, crashed in the Ukraine, east of Donetsk on 17 July 2014. All 283 passengers and 15 crew members died, including 193 people with a Dutch nationality. The tragedy came at a time of deepening tensions between Moscow, and the United States and European countries, as the plane was shot down from an area which was controlled by Russian-backed separatists (Dutch Safety Board 2015). It does not seem farfetched to argue that the downing of MH17 can be considered to be a disaster with consequences for international political relationships similar to the case of the Lockerbie bombing on December 21, 1988 (Stigers, 1998).

Besides the international political tensions, the MH17 disaster had two other distinctive characteristics when compared to ‘regular’ local crises. First, post-event activities such as the organization of the identification and (forensic) investigation into the actual cause of the disaster, were taken care of by either Ukraine authorities

or the Dutch national government. Second, the bereaved or affected families were not concentrated in one city or area: they live in areas throughout the Netherlands. All in all, 54 mayors (or their deputies) were involved. They were all confronted with the impact of this disaster as soon as stories regarding the names of victims began to circulate in many municipalities.

Dutch mayors are appointed in a somewhat hybrid public administrative system and not elected directly by citizens themselves. The King appoints the mayor after the candidate is being proposed by the city council.

Unlike many other countries, Dutch mayors chair local and regional crisis teams and approve final decisions.

After crises, Dutch mayors are usually referred to as ‘citizenfather’. Citizenfather is a literal translation of the Dutch word ‘burgervader’ (or citizenmother: ‘burgermoeder’ depending on the gender of the mayor). This label fits their symbolic role in the community, comparable to the public roles elected mayors like Giuliani and Nagin fulfilled in the aftermath of 9/11 and hurricane Katrina. At the time, they spoke directly to the citizens – and then to the nation – making sure that constituents understood that their leader was concerned about their emotional and physical well-being (Griffin-Padgett & Allison, 2010). According to ‘t Hart, the importance of such public display of compassion with those suffering hardship can hardly be underestimated (‘t Hart, 1993). Thus far, the focus of disaster research on public leaders is mostly based on individual case studies, which happened within municipal boundaries.

An important characteristic and possible limitation of single case studies is that the specific elements of the disaster can hardly be separated from the person of the mayor or how he fulfilled his role as public leader.

Possible conclusions about leadership, i.e., whether results can be attributed to the mayor and/or specific elements of the disaster, are therefore to a certain extent tentative. To be able to make a distinction between both, a series of single case studies that follow more or less identical disasters are needed.

In an earlier systematic review (Jong, Dückers & van der Velden, 2016b), the authors already called for more studies enabling comparisons of mayors in similar crisis situations, such as the studies on public leaders by Gallagher, Fontenot and Boyle, (2007), Fairhurst and Cooren, (2009) and Griffin-Padgett et al.

(2010). It bridges a gap identified by Boin and Gralepois (2006a), who stated that in the absence of a systematic investigation, the search for best practices amounts to little more than a description of heroic leaders and happy crisis endings.

The MH17 disaster provided a unique opportunity to conduct a comparative study, because the mayors were confronted with exactly the same situation, i.e., the same ‘distinct’ disaster that caused the death of their own citizens. It provides an opportunity to assess and compare how the role of tens of mayors was perceived and evaluated. Insight in how citizens and media perceive crisis leadership may help or even improve these aspects of crisis leadership of mayors in the future. To the best of our knowledge, no existing study has examined a crisis situation in such a way. In order to meet our goal, we set up a qualitative content analysis of both regular and social media. It was the news media, together with the regular media, the victims, the general public and other authorities that set the stage for the evaluation of the performance of the mayors (Boin & Smith, 2006b). Similarly, Littlefield and Quenette (2007) add that those in authority would be wise to use the media to

identify how their words and actions are perceived by the public. Recent research on the Queensland floods in 2011 suggests that perceptions on social media influenced the news media (De Bussy & Paterson, 2012). In our analysis, we focus on reports in newspapers and on Twitter as exponents of the regular and social media respectively, regarding any MH17-related activities (or absence of activities) by mayors. The (social) media set the stage for the public's evaluation of the activities and performance of mayors. Together, these reports should give us an indication of the perceptions of the general public and media themselves. Even though social media users might not fully represent society, we are confident their expressions contribute to the stage Boin et al. (2006b) refer to. As such, collecting the tweets can be regarded as an appropriate manner to retrieve direct feedback on the way mayors behaved in the aftermath of MH17.

In sum, our research question is 'Which MH17-related activities (or absence of certain activities) of Dutch mayors are mentioned in (social) media and if and how were they perceived in these media at different stages during the first year after this disaster?'

2. METHOD

We chose a timeframe between 17 July 2014 (day of the crash) and 31 July 2015. As such, we included the disaster's first anniversary on 17 July 2015, on which the victims were commemorated. For convenience, the period was split up in three, somewhat arbitrary, separate stages. Since in this specific case, Dutch mayors had no role in the immediate response at the scene of disaster itself, we decided to create sub-sections based on key events which can be regarded as ritual landmarks in the aftermath. These were the local memorials and gatherings (key event 1), the national memorial (key event 2) and the first anniversary of the disaster (key event 3). As such, the first period (stage I) covers the first month, from 17 July through 17 August 2014.

The second period (stage II) runs from 18 August 2014 until 10 November 2014. On that day (November 10), a National Memorial Service was held. The Dutch King and Queen, ministers and other public officials from the Netherlands and other countries that lost citizens in the disaster, as well as mayors of the affected towns attended this memorial service. The third, final and longer stage (stage III) runs from 11 November 2014 until 31 July 2015.

As said, with respect to the (social) media, we focused on two information sources: newspapers and Twitter. We used the online academic news database (LexisNexis Academic) to obtain full text reprints of published Dutch newspaper articles from electronic archives. Articles were searched for similar keywords, i.e., MH17 (or mh-17) AND mayor (Dutch: burgemeester) OR elderman OR deputy (Dutch: wethouder or loco). We assumed that newspaper articles would use the full function and surname of the mayor at least once in their coverage, since it is unlikely that newspapers will mention the name of a mayor without using the title 'mayor'. In the case of newspapers, the timeframes were extended with 1 day, since the news was published in most newspapers 1 day after the event. We included the main Dutch national newspapers in our selection (NRC Handelsblad, de Volkskrant, De Telegraaf, Trouw, Algemeen Dagblad) as well as the top 14 regional newspapers belonging to publishing houses of Wegener, TMG-regiokranten and NDC. Within the publishing houses, articles are usually republished in sisternewspapers as well.

For our qualitative analysis, we removed these duplicate articles from the original set of 547 published articles. This resulted in a total set of 299 unique newspaper articles, editorials, columns and opinion pieces.

Tweets were retrieved using the Coosto software (www.coosto.nl), a widely used tool suited for webcare and qualitative online data analysis. The software enabled us to export the tweets captured for using keywords in any given period. Tweets were searched and collected based on the following keywords, not necessarily hashtags: MH17 (or mh-17), references to (the name of) the mayor and/or his deputy and/or the name of the town where victims came from. These search terms were used to ensure that all tweets about mayors were captured. For instance, and in contrast to newspaper articles, Twitter users, limited by a maximum of 140 characters per tweet, might only refer to the mayor by mentioning his or her surname and not using the word 'mayor' explicitly.

One should realize the total number of tweets is also influenced by retweets. A retweet 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). Tweets are usually retweeted when users think it is worth spreading. For our analysis, we captured 1.698 tweets, including 709 retweets. This set includes 12 tweets by mayors themselves.

2.1. Analyses and coding procedures

In order to assess the perceived performance and evaluations of mayors, we assigned three possible values to the content of newspaper articles or tweets: neutral, negative or positive. A label was given based on the content and overall tone-of-voice of the entire newspaper article or tweet. Articles and tweets that only reflected the mayors own opinion but without any indication of the appreciation or disapproval of journalists, citizens or others, were independent of the tone-of-voice, coded 'neutral'. In general, an article or tweet was regarded as neutral when the appearance of a mayor is mentioned (by others than the mayor him or herself), without any interpretation or normative terminology.

All tweets by mayors were coded as 'neutral' by default; retweets of these mayoral tweets however, could be coded negative, positive or neutral. An example of a neutral tweet is the sentence 'a gathering was held which was attended by the mayor', because it reflects a factual tone without judgment on the nature of the mayor's presence or appearance.

In our coding, only an additional description of the situation in which a mayor fulfils his role, gives it either a 'positive' or 'negative' interpretation. Articles or tweets were coded as 'positive' when the role of the mayor was discussed as inspiring, moving and/or relevant, for example 'the mayor read out a wellchosen poem during the gathering'. It was labelled 'negative' whenever the performance of a mayor was disliked, disapproved or otherwise criticized. We included quotes of our samples in the results section.

Two researchers independently rated the set of news articles and tweets. The level of agreement between the two raters was satisfactory. Cohen's Kappa (.80 for the newspaper articles and .82 for the Twitter messages) was calculated using IBM SPSS version 20. Kappa values between .80 and .90 are generally considered to exhibit acceptable levels of interrater reliability (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2005). Given that a high level of inter-rater reliability had been established, the scores of the first author were used for our analysis.

A complete list of all identified and processed newspaper articles and tweets (In Dutch), including the codings of the identified articles and tweets, can be obtained from the first author.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Findings from newspaper articles

We found a total of 138 articles for stage I, 62 articles for stage II and 99 articles for stage III.

3.1.1 Articles during stage I

Most articles published during the first stage, were labelled as ‘neutral’ (122; 88.4%). Newspapers covered similar gatherings as those that citizens tweeted about; i.e., where mayors attended memorial services, charity marches and the like. A newspaper article has more room to report about the mayor’s activities. For this reason, we add two examples of quotes from such neutral articles, without any interpretation by the journalist: ‘I want to express my sincere and deep sympathy for the families and friends of the victims. It is difficult to understand how a disaster like this has destroyed so many lives. Behind the scenes, the municipality will provide all the support necessary.’ (Mayor Spies, Stichtse Vecht; *Algemeen Dagblad* 2014a) ‘The municipality has arranged ‘a care-team’ to assist the bereaved families with practical issues that have to be arranged, but also with grieving and coping with their loss. (Mayor van der Laan, Amsterdam; *Het Parool* 2014a) Positive articles (10; 7.3%) quoted citizens who appear to have appreciated the way the mayor participated in local gatherings. These articles referred to speeches and how mayors were able to find words for the collective feelings of the town’s hurt. ‘The mayor of Bergen op Zoom articulated the feelings of the people who attended the memorial service’, one newspaper wrote (*BN/DeStem* 2014b). Another positive labelled article reports on the attendance of the mayor of Rotterdam during a silent march (*Algemeen Dagblad* 2014c). It was referred to as ‘impressive’. In another news article, his presence at a memorial gathering was referred to as ‘comforting’ (*Algemeen Dagblad* 2014b). It is similar to an article about another mayor, who was described as speaking short, powerful and impressive during the memorial service: It was very silent at the central square of Breda.

Mayor Peter van der Velden gives a speech. Short.

Powerful. Impressive. (. . .) ‘We are not going to wait until people approach us with their questions and problems. We will approach them ourselves.

We have people to do that. You cannot imagine the practical challenges that the bereaved will find on their path. In this, we are going to support them as best as we can. We have to do this. They will not be left on their own. We are here for them’ (Mayor Van der Velden, Breda; *BN/DeStem*, 2014a) The mayor of Kaag en Braassem discusses how she keeps in touch with families who lost their loved ones during an interview (*Leidsch Dagblad* 2014). The article covering this interview had a neutral tone-of-voice.

Two examples were given where mayors presented themselves as a spokesperson for the victims’ family. First, the mayor of Simpelveld asked the residents of his town who collectively started an initiative for a memorial service, to cancel it, on behalf of the family (*De Limburger* 2014a). Second, the mayor of Dordrecht asked his citizens to show restraint towards the victims’ family (*Algemeen Dagblad* 2014d).

Negative articles (6; 4.4%) in this period mainly focused on a remark from the mayor of Hilversum.

During a show on national radio, he called for the 29-year-old daughter of Russian president Putin, who lives in the Netherlands, to be expelled. Another example of negative press was found in a regional newspaper, which commented on the absence of the mayor of Maastricht. The mayor did not return from holidays to join a commemoration. The organization cancelled the commemoration, for as long as the public discussion about the absent mayor would continue: ‘The mayor noticed, again, that a mayor apparently cannot do it right. His innocent tweet, sent out with good intentions, was misinterpreted and in social media the story rapidly took shape: Mayor Hoes preferred the sun over the memorial ceremony.’ (De Limburger 2014b)

3.1.2 Articles during stage II

Among the articles from stage II, we coded 43 articles as ‘neutral’ (69.4%), 6 as ‘negative’ (9.7%) and 13 articles as ‘positive’ (21.0%). In this stage, many articles were published in relation to the National Memorial in November 2014 and look back upon the first few weeks after the disaster. An example of a neutral description of the words of a mayor at the end of the summer recess: ‘A total of 14 men, women and children, cheerfully went on board of the plane on that sunny day in July, to find their deaths a couple of hours later in a field of sunflowers. The ‘citizen father’ read the names of the victims aloud, and then the city council asked for one minute of silence. A gasp, a tear.

The mayor: ‘To us bystanders, modesty is appropriate, because this is firstly and above all, your grief.’” (Mayor Van Aartsen, *The Hague, Algemeen Dagblad*, 2014e) In a positive article, relatives speak about the mayoral support they feel (De Gooi- en Eemlander 2014). Two articles (De Gelderlander 2014; *Eindhovens Dagblad* 2014) interview relatives, who are both positive in relation to the involvement of their own mayor when he visited them for his support towards. One of these articles discussed the fact that even the busy mayor from Amsterdam made time to visit bereaved families, which was regarded as remarkable: ‘At first I wondered how we could obtain emotional benefit from such a man in a suit. But then you feel his involvement and practical issues become almost irrelevant. It was a precious moment’, one relative says. Another relative: ‘He stayed with us for one hour and a half.’ (. . .) ‘Sincerely interested. He assured me of his support.

His literal words: ‘what might take you one-and-a-half week of kicking bureaucratic doors, often takes one phonecall by me. Use this.’ He kept his word, right away.’ (De Gelderlander 2014).

Negative articles referred to the earlier remarks about the daughter of president Putin by the mayor of Hilversum. However, the same mayor received positive criticism as well, especially about the way he supported his community in their struggle. News articles also refer positively to his presence at the military base in the city of Hilversum, where long lines of hearses, carrying the remains, arrived for forensic investigations.

3.1.3 Articles during stage III

The articles in stage III were mostly neutral (81; 81.8%). Two articles report on two mayors who fulfilled a task in the ceremonial transport of the remains of the victims of MH17.

‘With the arrival of the last seven coffins with remains of passengers of flight MH17, the mission ended Saturday. (. . .) Mayor Van Gijzel, minister Ard van der Steur

(Safety and Justice) and other dignitaries joined the ceremony at Eindhoven Airforce Base.’ (Eindhovens Dagblad 2015b).

Hours later, another regional newspaper reports on the arrival of the hearses: ‘For the ninth time, mayor Pieter Broertjes from Hilversum lays down a wreath at the entrance of the institute where the forensic investigations take place’ (De Gooi- en Eemlander 2015a) In an interview one year after the crash, the mayor explains how he felt under those circumstances. ‘I always wondered what it meant. I thought: I am the father of my children, but I came so close to those families and was confronted with their grief. They needed an arm around their shoulder, compassion, and I could provide it. This is how I changed from a mayor [burgemeester] into a citizenfather [burgervader].’ (mayor Broertjes, Hilversum, De Gooi- en Eemlander, 2015b).

Positive articles (14; 14.1%) underlined the solidarity in towns and the central role the mayors played in supporting this. Relatives spoke about the visit of a mayor in a positive manner (Het Parool 2014b). The MH17 disaster was mentioned several times in New Year speeches. Two examples of positive judgments in newspaper articles: ‘For a short moment it becomes too much for mayor . . . at the start of his New Year speech. Talking about last year’s MH17 disaster that took the life of a resident touched him deeply. ‘I am getting a bit emotional’. He said as he gazed shortly in the direction of victim’s father. It characterizes the mayor, who sincerely supports and cares about his citizens’ (about mayor Ederveen, Valkenswaard, Eindhovens Dagblad, 2015a) ‘The mayor delivers an impressive speech. He inspires with words like ‘together’, connectedness, the sharing of success and drawbacks but does not leave his concerns unmentioned. I see that through the years he has grown into his role as a ‘citizenfather’. This role fits him perfectly. He receives a well-earned and loud applause. Well done!’ (about mayor Meijer, Zwolle, De Weekkrant 2015) Again, negative articles (4; 4.0%) refer to the Putinremark and the absence of the mayor of Maastricht at the time people in the city expected him to join the memorials. One of the bereaved directed a negative reflection not so much at a mayor in particular, but at the inequality in the approach of MH-17 bereaved by mayors in general, in relation to other losses of close family members: ‘A friend of mine lost her child in a car accident. In her situation, the mayor did not visit her. In her situation, not everyone was showing compassion. It would have done her good as well. You want to be heard.’ (NRC Handelsblad, 2014a)

3.2. Findings from tweets

We identified a total of 1.698 tweets. The number of tweets fluctuates during stage I and II and showed several peaks in the number of tweets and times with relative little activity on Twitter (see Figure 1). We found 811 tweets for stage I (with peaks at the day of the National Memorial), 312 tweets for stage II (with a peak during the arrival of the wreckage of MH17 at the Gilze-Rijen Airforce Base on December 12th) and 575 tweets for stage III (with a peak on the first anniversary on 17 July 2015).

[FIGURE 1]

3.2.1. Tweets during stage I

During the first month, the largest amount of tweets was sent during the first week after the disaster. A second increase of tweets occurred around August 17th, 2014, when a local remembrance gathering was held in Hilversum, a town with 15 casualties among the passengers of MH17, the highest number in the Netherlands.

During stage I, tweets were overwhelmingly neutral (695 tweets; 85.7%). Neutral tweets mainly referred to mayors who confirm that people from their municipalities were on board of the MH17 aircraft and expressed their feelings of shock and compassion.

Later, these tweets were followed by announcements of mayors who interrupted their holidays to come back home, open or sign public condolence registries, the retrenchment of festivities and the contributions of mayors to local memorial services.

Two examples of neutral tweets, which give a factual description of the situation: 'Minute of silence by mayor Pieter Smit during the Night of Winschoten festivities #MH17' (@timothydeklerk, 18 July 2014) 'Mayor Van der Laan interrupts his holidays as well, due to MH17' (@annemijnvh, 19 July 2014) Positive tweets (42 tweets; 5.2%) usually referred to the words the mayors chose during commemoration activities, their support to the next of kin and the way in which they fulfilled their crisis tasks in general.

'Impressive gathering at the #CentralSquare with compassionate and encouraging words from the mayor! #MH17 #Breda' (@GB_Breda, 23 July 2014) Negative tweets (74 tweets; 9.1%) were dominated by remarks of the mayor who asked for the expulsion of Putin's daughter. Other negative tweets discussed the decision of the mayor of Nijmegen, who banned the traditional flower parade at the finish line (the Via Gladiola) of the International Four Days Marches.

'Ridiculous. Mayor Bruls bans flowers. There was supposed to be some kind of memorial at the finish line anyway #MH17 #ViaGladiola' (@Widtvoet, 18 July 2014)

3.2.2. Tweets during stage II

In this stage, the amount of tweets regarding the activities of mayors in the aftermath of the disaster is relatively low, until November 10th, 2014. The period up to November 10th (Stage II) consisted of 312 tweets.

Again, most tweets (286 tweets; 91.7%) were neutral, while positive tweets (23 tweets; 7.4%) referred to similar circumstances as the tweets in stage I, such as references to mayors who appeared at tributes: 'Beautiful and moving tribute from Mayor Van Aartsen for victims from The Hague MH17' (@Esther-Habers, 18 September 2014) and a message directly aimed at Mayor Delissen (Peel en Maas): '@BurgDelissen True. Emotion and delight. Finally they are together again. Thank you for your empathy! #supportsus #MH17' (@IngridSmets, 13 October 2014)

Three tweets had a negative tone-of-voice (1.0%).

These tweets refer to the earlier mentioned remarks of the mayor of Hilversum who advocated the expulsion of the daughter of President Putin, and his attendance at the National Memorial Service: 'Did the retarded mayors forget about their colleague, who criticized Putin and his daughter because of the Russian BUK rocket which was aimed at the #MH17?' (@gRUTTensEU, 30 October 2014)

3.2.3. Tweets during stage III

This stage covered 575 tweets. It reached a peak in the week of July 10-17, 2015, when preparations were discussed for the first anniversary of the crisis. Most tweets were labelled as 'neutral' (486 tweets; 84.5%).

Two negative tweets are aimed at the mayor of Naarden, who joins radio show 'Twee Dingen' in which she explains the mayoral duties during MH17: 'Why do I feel uncomfortable when I hear the mayor of Naarden talk about victims of MH17?

PR show for herself? #tweedingen' (@ruitjesspinsels, 16 July 2015) The largest set of 'positive' (8.5%) and 'negative' tweets (7.0%) are part of a discussion, coined by the mayor of Noordenveld. He commented that 'all the attention for MH17 is getting disproportional, especially when compared to other incidents where people perish.' Of all negative posts in this stage, 32 tweets refer to the mayor as 'incapable for the job': 'Mayor Hans v.d. Laan of #Noordenveld, believes the attention for #MH17 is getting disproportional.

Time to resign.' (@willemwjoo, 18 July 2015) In total, 29 Twitter users just agree with the mayor (positive posts).

'Actually, I agree. Injustice. Mayor from province of Drenthe takes attention to #MH17 'injustice'' (@judithinnoord, 18 July 2015)

4. DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was 'to assess which MH17-related activities (or absence of certain activities) of Dutch mayors were mentioned in the (social) media and if and how they were evaluated at different stages during the first year after this disaster?' We focused on newspapers and Twitter as sources of information on (social) media.

As mentioned in the introduction, from a mayoral point of view, the MH17 disaster happened elsewhere but nevertheless had implications 'back home'.

Whereas the public performance of a mayor and the process of political responsibility and accountability afterwards usually seem to be closely connected (Boin & 't Hart, 2003; Gasper & Reeves, 2011; Lay, 2009; Resodihardjo, van Eijk & Carroll, 2012), this was not the case with the MH17. In the aftermath of MH17, there were no blame games, and no political accountability concerning evacuation orders, permits or disaster management in general (an element mayors are all too familiar with in the aftermath of crises within the boundaries of their own municipality). The downing of MH17 was a situation that occurred outside their sphere of influence. Political partisanship was no issue in the aftermath of MH17 either. The King appoints Dutch mayors independent of their political preference, though 98% is member of a political party (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations 2015). Only in two instances, a mayor was asked to use her political contact. Furthermore, 13 negative tweets referred to the political party of the mayor who initiated the discussion about the daughter of Putin. In two instances, the political party was mentioned in positive tweets about a memorial gathering. In newspaper articles, the political parties were of no importance either.

Findings showed that the local society regarded the activities of mayors as neutral-to-slightly-positive contributions: they publically announced and confirmed the names of the passengers who died in the tragedy, they attended and publicly spoke at memorial services, they were supportive to the bereaved and mourned together with the local communities. We did not find striking differences in the description of mayors in news articles compared to tweets. Apparently, both newspaper articles and tweets valued mayors in a similar manner.

When the attendance of a mayor at a memorial, bringing his condolences or interrupting his holidays is described in a neutral manner, one should realize that it is apparently worth mentioning anyway. Even though a large proportion of the neutral tweets described these kinds of situations, we decided to code them other-than-'neutral'-only in those cases when it explicitly had such a tone-of-voice.

A possible explanation for the neutrality in more than 80% of news articles and tweets, is the absence of direct political responsibility. However, the absence of political responsibility for the occurrence of the disaster does not automatically indicate the absence of responsibility for the aftermath. A clear example is the Katrina disaster and its aftermath. Arceneaux and Stein (2006) found, that under crisis circumstances, citizens attributed blame out of a desire to maintain a sense of control. It suggests, at the very least, that mayors are evaluated even in situations where they have no direct political responsibility. Research on the crisis leadership styles on the Queensland floods (De Bussy et al., 2012) presented similar findings, where Queensland Premier Anna Bligh was perceived to be inspirational and charismatic and Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard 's communication style was characterized as 'robotic and rehearsed'. One is, therefore, not only evaluated on the basis of direct political responsibility and actions. The way in which a political leader presents his- or herself must be taken into account as well. As such, the fact that mayors had no responsibility in the downing of MH17 itself, does not explain why the majority of news articles and tweets can be considered as 'neutral'. Of course, the MH17 disaster did not affect local communities in the Netherlands the way natural disasters such as floodings would, in terms of the destruction of homes, infrastructures and facilities. Future research following similar disasters, such as the disaster with Germanwings flight 9525 in France (24 March 2015), may provide more data to elaborate on this particular explanation considering that the MH17 and Germanwings flight 9525 are similar 'distant crises' from the viewpoint of Dutch and German mayors.

As an alternative explanation, we should realize that a 'neutral' and factual article or tweet might not necessarily reflect the underlying emotions. Particularly in the case of people who attend memorial gatherings, one might feel social pressure to be either neutral or positive. When more is known about the motivation of the sender, such a tweet carrying could be considered 'positive' or 'negative'. This information is currently unavailable.

When we look at the 'negative tweets' during stage I to III, we do not find any negative tweets by people who join the ceremonies themselves. Negative tweets are all on other subjects, from the remarks about the daughter of Putin to the flowerban during the Four Day Marches.

Are memorial gatherings, in other words, circumstances in which it might become rather inappropriate to be outspokenly negative about a mayor? In that line of thought, a negative experience does not necessarily translate into a negative tweet. A study by Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen and Carter (2015) explains the main purpose of social media at funerals, in particular Instagram, as a way to signal one's presence and emotional circumstances to a wider social network. A proof of 'being there' might be more relevant than the experience itself and/or the way one describes it. That being the case, however, should not refrain columnists in newspapers from accurately covering and commenting on it, unless they also feel similar social pressure. Hearsom (2012) analysed the detailed coverage of Amy Winehouse's death in British press. In that particular situation, the press did discuss the funeral and not only commented on the flowers, but also on the more negative experiences with empty vodka bottles, beer cans and attention-seeking visitors in front of her house (Hearsom, 2012). Since newspaper articles did hardly express a negative tone either, this might indicate that the underlying experiences that were reported through articles

and tweets, were perhaps similar to the way they were written down. We have no reason to assume that negative experiences with mayors in the aftermath of MH17 were covered with the cloak of charity, though we cannot completely rule out this possibility. But, even if this were (sometimes) the case, it did not appear on the public stage on which the performance of mayors and crisis managers will be evaluated (Boin et al., 2006b). It was outside the scope of this study to assess to which extent journalists and Twitter users disclose their private and personal opinions.

As described in the results section, one mayor of a larger city did not attend a memorial service but preferred to continue his holidays when others decided to come back. He attracted negative press, an indication that journalist and Twitter users apparently expected the mayor to join local memorial services. This interesting finding, i.e., being criticized on not employing an activity instead of being criticized on a completed activity, clearly suggests that mayors face certain expectations concerning their 'duties' after an 'a-typical' disaster as explained above. Other mayors did attend memorial services and gatherings and this was noted without any specific comment. Similarly, the fact that several mayors discontinued their holidays and came back was taken for granted. Tweets noticed that mayors interrupted their holidays, but without further remarks like 'impressive he comes back from holidays' or something similar. Newspaper articles wrote about it as something which was taken for granted and not, as one might expect, as something extraordinary. This suggests that these mayors just did what they were supposed to do in this situation: attend and give a voice to the collective mourning.

Public speaking after crises is regarded as 'meaning making', the leadership task of communicating the broader impacts of a crisis to citizens, media and other stakeholders (Boin, 't Hart, Stern & Sundelius, 2005; Jong et al. 2016b). Often, 'meaning making' is a highly symbolic function, fulfilling the need for direction and guidance (Boin, Kuipers & Overdijk, 2013). Regarding the Dutch mayors in the aftermath of the MH17 disaster, the public perspective reflects the role of mayors in finding words to describe the collective impact, including their participation in social gatherings. What we identified is also what Kofman Bos, 't Hart and Ullberg (2005) refer to as 'remembering'. According to them, it consists of publicly acknowledging that many crises and disasters are traumatic experiences for the victims, responders and the organizations and communities involved, as well as responsively accommodating the desire that the community should 'never forget'. The local memorials, the national memorial on 10 November 2014 and the first anniversary are all examples of 'remembering' in which mayors took the lead locally, or joined a larger, public event.

However, we also noticed that mayors visited the bereaved families at home and supported them in their material needs. It is a less visible but presumably nevertheless a highly appreciated role. Thus far, public leaders are warned as they often fall prey to their own unrealistic promises to victims (Boin et al., 2003).

According to identified articles and tweets, there were no public remarks indicating that mayoral promises were evaluated as unrealistic or their involvement was purely symbolic. They supported the families with practical issues whenever needed, and lent a highly appreciated 'listening ear', as the articles from stage II (Eindhovens Dagblad 2014; De Gelderlander 2014) and stage III (Het Parool 2014b) showed.

We realize that this more private perspective comes from just three interviews with the next of kin. On the other hand, we did not find any interview where this specific role of mayors was disliked. It is at least an indication of an apparent valuable and valued role for mayors in the aftermath of crises.

All in all, mayors appear to have functioned on both public and private stages as the facilitator whose task is not only to manage the crisis, but also to support the healing process from disaster to restoration (Griffin- Padgett et al., 2010). They were evaluated accordingly.

Where ‘meaning making’ and ‘remembering’ depart from a public dimension, the ‘listening ear’ and support with practical issues are far more private, although interviews with family members elevate it to a public perspective again. Sometimes the public and private stages meet, as the example where two mayors presented themselves as a spokesperson on request of the victims’ family showed.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND LIMITATIONS

The findings and conclusions of the present study are indicative for the role mayors can fulfil as mourners-in-chief in local communities (see also Fastenberg, 2011 on presidents as mourner-in-chief), but should be further validated by other studies on similar and dissimilar types of disaster to improve our understanding of the ‘modus operandi’ of mayors during and after crises.

In addition, some study limitations should be discussed.

The collection of newspaper articles was limited to national and regional newspapers. We are aware we missed newspaper clippings from local newspapers (not captured by LexisNexis Academic), although we assume that a fierce local debate about the activities of a mayor in the aftermath of this (and other) disasters, would rapidly have reached the regional newspapers as well (and vice versa).

In theory, it is possible that we missed some tweets in the study period because they were posted and deleted by users afterwards. The present study focused on newspapers articles and Twitter. In the Netherlands, there currently are approximately 1 million daily Twitter users (Jong & Dückers, 2016a) on a population of 17 million people. As such, we believe it is a representative, mainstream social medium. We did not analyse other (social) media such as TV, radio, Facebook or Instagram. In principle, it is possible that they added information to the stage by which the performance of mayors will be evaluated, and that it would differ from the articles and tweets we identified.

However, we believe that is highly unlikely that, for instance, negative evaluations of the performances of mayors are restricted or very skewed to one of the (social) media.

The MH17-disaster was an unusual kind of crisis from a mayoral point of view since the downing itself happened thousands of miles away from his/her municipality.

While in ordinary crisis situations, mayors have to combine several tasks, from chairing the crisis team to using their legislative powers, this crisis primarily asked for ‘meaning making’, ‘remembering’ and, more privately, taking care of practical needs and lend a ‘listening ear’ to the bereaved.

From an academic perspective, the study suggests that the public role of mayors can be considered as a table stake or *conditio sine qua non*. One is expected to deliver on ‘meaning making’ and ‘remembering’, but it is hard to get this behaviour reflected as ‘appreciation’ in news articles or on social media.

Only a few mayors received appreciation for the words they spoke during memorial services and silent marches. That said, if one fails to deliver, it easily punishes a mayor with a significant disadvantage. We discussed three of such examples. In the case of the mayor of Noordenveld, who publically suggested that the coverage of MH17 was disproportional compared to other smaller incidents (see Helsloot, 2007; which is correct from the viewpoint that high-quality support to people affected by disasters should, among others, be equal: Dückers & Thormar, 2015), the remark led to a debate on Twitter in which people either doubted his mayoral capabilities and others agreed.

Where it is hard to get appreciation for the public role, interviews report about the distinct appreciation the mayors received from victims' families, whenever mayors visited them in the privacy of their homes to lend a 'listening ear', and to discuss their material needs. Although they are public leaders, they also bring an essential element of private aftercare into practice (see Hobfoll, Watson, Bell, Bryant, Brymer & Friedman, 2007). Apparently, one does neglect the importance of direct contact between a mayor and the next of kin, when mayors are only evaluated through public lenses and the focus is exclusively put on the collective impact. We learnt that the mayor of Hilversum, even though he was generally criticized on his remarks on Putin's daughter, was highly appreciated for the relationship he maintained with the families.

Further study on the appreciation of victims' families themselves, other than through interviews in newspapers, might deepen our understanding of the interaction between the collective and more private aspects of mayors' involvement as a 'citizen father'. This also counts for the more indirect influence they might have on the recovery of the families, through public acknowledgements in terms of 'meaning making' and 'remembering'.

Of course, mayors might have their own goals as well. After all, crises can be opportunities for communities, organizations and individual actors to both strengthen resilience and increase their reputation and legitimacy (Olsson, 2014). Mayors may want to use their public or private role in order to reach those kinds of crisis communication goals. Further research on the perceived purpose of public 'meaning making', 'remembering', the more private aspects of the 'citizen father' and the interaction between both aspects is welcomed, not in the last place among mayors themselves.

It might provide specific guidance for crisis situations where people expect the mayor to appear, whether it is a large disaster or a smaller, emotional incident.

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FIGURE

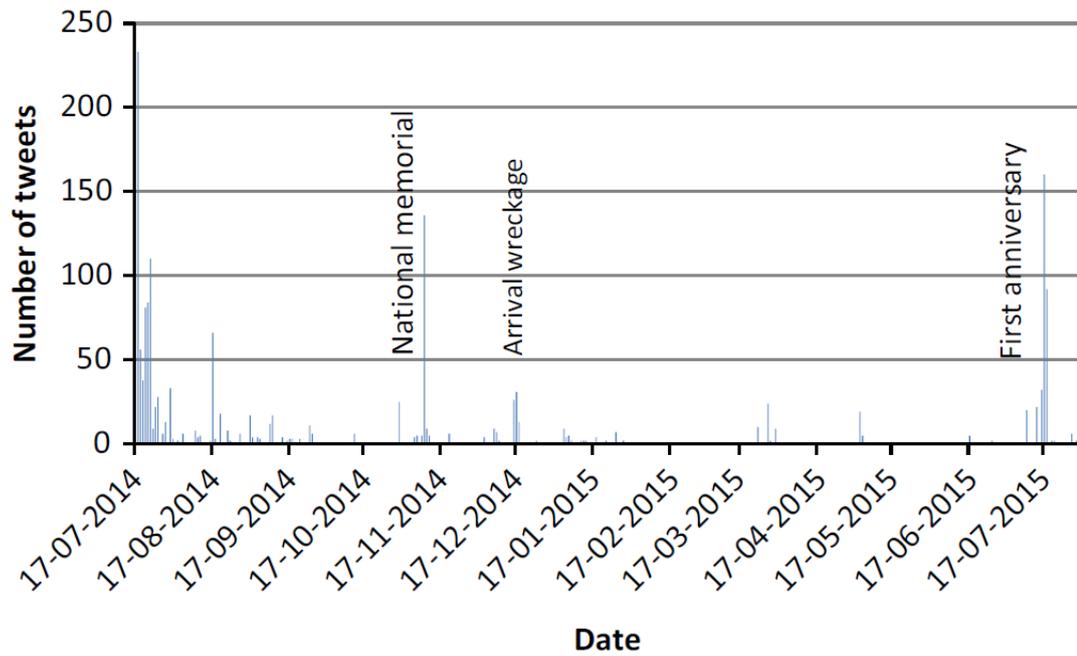


Figure 1. MH17-related tweets over time.