

Writing a *raison d'être* to resist institutional disruption: conditions and limits. The case of the definition of a *raison d'être* for a European airline

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Résumé:

This research studies under what conditions writing an organisation's *raison d'être* can or not help resist institutional disruption. It bridges both literatures on institutional work and *raison d'être*. A single case study of a European airline trying to build its *raison d'être* under the pressure of climate change activists and the Covid-19 crisis shows that a *raison d'être* can be an asset for organisations that want to protect themselves from new institutional disruptions. However, writing a *raison d'être* is particularly difficult for legacy organisations, especially when they have unclear governance or are not used to working on topics far from operational realities. But under the right conditions (employees' involvement, CEO's support, strategic ambitions), a *raison d'être* can be helpful to build the first steps of an institutional work based on discourses.

Mots-clés: institutional work, *raison d'être*, air transport, corporate mission

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INTRODUCTION

An organisation's *raison d'être* defines the contribution the organisation can have on society (Segrestin et al., 2021). Closed to the concept of “mission statement”, a *raison d'être* is a striking and straightforward sentence that explains the organisation's added value on society to different audiences, from public opinion to stakeholders. Organisations are actors of institutions. Institutions are defined as enduring elements in social life (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) that provide stability and meaning to a society (Scott, 2001). However, when an institution faces disruption, an organisation may experience difficulties defending itself. An institutional disruption is a form of institutional work. We call institutional work the actions that create, maintain, and change an institution (Zilber, 2013).

In this article, we try to understand under what conditions writing an organisation's *raison d'être* can or not help resist institutional disruption.

We use a qualitative research design (Dumez, 2016) based on a single case study of *Sirius*, a European airline we anonymised. It is an organisation that belongs to an institution facing institutional disruption through the *flight shaming* movement (Gössling et al., 2020).

Our research provides multiple insights. First, we show that the process of writing a *raison d'être* can be complex or considered futile in a context of institutional disruption if only seen as a branding opportunity. Second, the process of creation of a *raison d'être* should not be underestimated and should not be outsourced to legacy companies. Old and established companies will dig deeper into their history and values to make explicit their identity. It needs the full support of Executive Management and employees, even if they are not used to working on such topics far from operational realities. Finally, our finding contributes to the *raison d'être* and institution work literature by bridging these two kinds of literature. A *raison d'être* can be the first step of a discursive strategy to defend or protect the institution under disruption.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 INSTITUTIONAL DISRUPTION

Institutions are defined as schemas, norms, and regulations constrain social actors' behaviour and make social life predictable and meaningful (Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2006). As they can evolve, institutions can be manipulated by different actors called institutional entrepreneurs (Battilana et al., 2009). For example, organisations, scholars, or activists can influence purposefully institutional environments (Hampel et al., 2017; Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017, Clemente et al., 2017). Thus, institutional work is defined as the actions dedicated to creating, maintaining, and changing an institution (Zilber, 2013). Therefore, disruptive institutional work weakens the institution (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), sometimes to the point that it can disappear (Oliver, 1992). In their 2006 research, Lawrence and Suddaby identify three forms that aim to disrupt institutions: disconnecting sanctions (Leblebici et al., 1991); disassociating moral foundations (Ahmadjian and Robinson, 2001); undermining assumptions and beliefs (Leblebici et al., 1991). Delacour and Leca (2011) show a four dimensions strategy to disrupt an institution: accumulation of internal pressures; creation of concrete alternatives; constitution of a critical mass to bring these alternatives to life; institutional pressure to convince most members to turn away from institutionalised practices by norm or mimicry. This majority can bring a radical change.

Facing institutional disruption, institutional actors (from individuals to organisations or groups of organisations) can define strategies to protect the institution. Two main aspects have been identified: maintaining the existing institution through institutional work based on reproductions of rules, routines, and socialisation (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Zilber, 2009) and defending the institution by fighting against disruptive institutional work (Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Rodner et al., 2020). They are both called institutional maintenance. Scholars then have studied different maintenance instruments: discourses (Philips et al., 2004); crisis communication (Fredriksson, 2014), artefacts (Blanc & Huault, 2014), spaces (Siebert et al., 2017), emotions and feelings (Gill & Burrow, 2018), justification (Taupin, 2012) etc.

Nevertheless, many articles have focused their attention on the industry level while studying institutional work (Boon et al., 2019; Distelmans & Scheerlinck, 2021) or institutional maintenance (Palmer et al., 2015). But few articles focus on how an organisation can face an institutional disruption. Do they have, for example, a dedicated strategy or tools? Therefore, it can be interesting to explore how an organisation react to institutional disruption

at its scale. And as institutional disruption often challenges the purpose of an institution (by questioning why what, and how), we identified that no bridge had been created between institutional disruption and the *raison d'être* of an organisation.

1.2 RAISON D'ÊTRE OF AN ORGANISATION

The *raison d'être* concept is closed to the concept of the corporate mission. According to Grimes et al. (2019), it's hard to find a standard definition of “corporate mission”, largely under-theorised, mainly explained through a mission statement. Mission statements are “*the organisations' aspirations regarding the values and the broad set or purposes they wish to enact*” (Hollensbe et al., 2014). A *raison d'être* is a sort of mission statement. For example, Danone's *raison d'être* is: “*bringing health through food to as many people as possible*”. It is shared on their corporate website. As Grimes et al. (2019) point out, the statement formalises “the relationship between organisations' identities and their actions and those organisations' images and actions. In other words, an organisation's mission since it is externalised by way of explicit statements or observables, patterned actions and communications over time also established audiences' expectations regarding what types of actions are appropriate for that organisation to undertake”. Such research is part of different international reforms in a context where scholars question corporations' legitimacy (Clarke et al., 2019) and their identity. Grimes et al. (2019) focus their research on how an organisation's mission can become a “*socio-cognitive bridge between its identity and its actions by specifying why the organisation should exist and how it should act*”. They also point out “mission drift”, defined as the perceived discontinuity between the actions and the organisation's image.

With new corporate forms such as *Benefit Corporations* or *Social Purpose Corporation* in the United States, *Enterprise à Mission* in France or *Societa Benefit* in Italy, scholars have explored how companies can reinforce their social and environmental impacts on societies. They are called “profit-with-purpose” corporate forms (Levillain and Segrestin, 2019). For many years, they have studied hybrid models that try to reconcile shareholders' and stakeholders' interests by prioritising the concept of social responsibility (Branellec and Lee, 2015). Those models claim that no enterprise should be managed without interest in its environmental impacts. Therefore, they use their *raison d'être* statement in an activist way, with some specific legal forms of governance. In May 2019 in France, a new law called “Loi PACTE” required every corporation to integrate social and environmental impacts on their

activity. This law introduces three new elements: (1) a mandatory obligation to consider the social and environmental implications at a business level; (2) the possibility for every organisation to define a *raison d'être*; (3) a new corporate form, the *Entreprise à mission* for enterprises that want to write, voluntarily, their social or environmental goals in their by-laws. This new law advocate for the idea that a company is much more than just the legal form of its business activities. In this context, a *raison d'être* is defined as the “*principles used by the company for which it intends to allocate instruments to carry out its activity*”. It is defined as a sort of compass for business managers, especially for strategic decisions (Martin, 2020), but mainly as a new legal innovation that permits a new form of corporation's accountability to society (Levillain and Segrestin, 2019). Valiorgue (2020) identifies that an efficient *raison d'être* is something that is “*the source of fundamental questions that concern the pillars of governance and corporate life.*” The PACTE law was written to encourage enterprises to start with a *raison d'être* and to end up with a legal mission. As this new law is recent, few researchers studied its impact on organisations, especially legacy companies. Danone has been one of France's most famous examples, as his CEO transforms the company into a mission-driven company (Etsy and Bilaud, 2021). But the process of writing a *raison d'être* has not been studied for old companies, especially those that do not intend to use it to become mission-driven. So, what use could companies make of this new asset? Some scholars show that a *raison d'être* can also be a fake communication tool that misleads consumers or investors about a company's impact intentions. They call it “purpose-washing” (Findlay & Moran, 2019). Nevertheless, the French definition of *raison d'être* is interesting in an unexplored context: institutional disruption.

1.3. WRITING A *RAISON D'ÊTRE* WHILE FACING INSTITUTIONAL DISRUPTION

The institutional disruption and the *raison d'être* literature have not met yet. However, they both have the concept of identity at the heart as defined by Goia et al. (2013): “*a self-referential concept defined by the members of an organisation to articulate who they are as an organisation to themselves as well as outsiders*”. As previously mentioned, a *raison d'être* is a sort of identity statement. In a certain way, institutional disruption disrupts the organisational identity of the organisation that is part of the institution. But when an organisation starts to think about its *raison d'être*, it focuses on its benefits to society and how to remain desirable and appropriate to society. (Segrestin et al., 2021). It could probably help fight against new institutional pressures by explaining why the organisation contributes to an institution that

makes sense for society. Indeed, when actors of an institution try to make explicit why the organisation benefits the community in a context of crisis (climate crisis, for instance), they probably indirectly contribute to the institution's defence.

Thus, our research question is: can writing an organisation *raison d'être* help resist institutional disruption? If so, in what way?

2. METHOD

2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

As we aim to describe and understand a new phenomenon, we use a qualitative research design (Dumez, 2016) based on a case study of an organisation belonging to an institution that is facing institutional disruption. The case study is helpful to study a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context, especially when the context is not clear or evident (Yin, 1989). We focus on a single case because it allows us to study this phenomenon without being constrained by primary tools or data decisions (Eisenhardt, 1989).

2.2 INDUSTRY AND CASE SELECTION

As we want to explore the role of the definition of a *raison d'être* to resist institutional disruption, we selected an organisation that is part of a disrupted institution. We choose the air transport institution for several reasons. First, the *flight shaming* movement (*flygskam*) challenges the necessity of air transport, especially for leisure flights (Gössling et al., 2019). Today, air transport faces new environmental pressures due to its high carbon impact. For instance, it has been criticised in the media and public discourse for its ecological footprint (Gössling et al., 2020). For example, the Carbone 4 consulting firm explains that a round-trip flight from Paris to New York City emits almost 2 tons of CO₂ per person. It represents the whole CO₂ budget that someone should respect to be in line with the Paris Agreement. Some journalists and activists, such as Greta Thunberg, even call for a halt to air traffic for ecological reasons (Porte, 2020). Then, even if the air transport's carbon impact is mainly over-estimated (Chiambaretto et al., 2021), it has some effects on how customers perceive the industry. An ongoing change in social norms (Gössling et al., 2020) disrupts the air travel institution. It forces actors such as airlines, aircraft manufacturers, and airports to react to this growing threat.

To investigate how writing a *raison d'être* can contribute to resisting institutional disruption, we decided to study *Sirius*, a legacy airline in Europe that we anonymised. *Sirius* is an airline that is part of a group that we will call *ABC Group*. This firm looked relevant as *Sirius* built its *raison d'être* from April 2019 to October 2019 and March 2020 for a “stress test” during the Covid-19 crisis. The project was part of a more significant project concerning *Sirius*'s branding. Its *raison d'être* was supposed to be the foundation of the next brand campaign. *Sirius* sought the help of a communications consultancy. Together, they did a three-month project to introduce *Sirius*'s *raison d'être* at the next board of directors in July 2019. They created a project group of 9 employees representing all the business units of the airline and a steering committee of three Executive Committee Members and the CEO.

2.3. EMPIRICAL SETTINGS

Writing *Sirius*' *raison d'être* was a transversal project led by Brand teams with *Sirius*'s CEO sponsorship. The process of creation was built on three steps. First, the communication consultants interviewed seven Executive Committee (ExCom) members, including *Sirius*'s CEO and *ABC Group* CEO. They also interviewed three top managers of communication agencies that used to work for *Sirius* to get insights into the company's values and strategic positioning. Secondly, they hosted three workshops called “exploration” (May 20th, 2019), “deepening” (June 7th, 2019) and “expression” (June 13th, 2019). A steering committee meeting has followed each workshop. These workshops aimed to develop three different options for *Sirius*' *raison d'être* could be. The final objective was to make the ExCom choose the right *raison d'être* between the three options. Finally, the *raison d'être* was selected during an ExCom meeting on April 23rd, 2019. It was then tested with customers and *Sirius*'s 300 top managers (July 9th, 2019) before being officially approved at the ExCom meeting on July 9th, 2019. During the Covid-19 crisis, as requested by the CEO, the Project Director worked on an updated version of the *raison d'être*. However, the *raison d'être* has never been released to the employees or the public despite its validation. Therefore, it cannot be shared here. We can only mention that the main topic of this *raison d'être* was the ability to connect people all around the world in a sustainable way. At the same time, *ABC Group* launched its *raison d'être* project. Results are expected for the first quarter of 2022. But the *Sirius*' *raison d'être* remains a stand-by project.

2.3 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

We collected data from both primary and secondary sources while using triangulation techniques to strengthen them (Eisenhardt, 1989). Data were collected for three months (September – November 2021) and are presented in Table 1 according to the data type.

Table 1 - Data Sources

SOURCE CATEGORY	TYPE OF DATA	NUMBERS
Primary Sources	Semi-structured interviews	11
	Informal conversations	6
Secondary Sources	Steering Committee presentations	6
	Workshop materials	3
	Internal project emails	10
	Internal newsletter (project)	1
	Executive Committee Report	1

The authors collected primary data through 11 semi-structured interviews with different project stakeholders. The list of the interviewees is presented in Table 2. The duration of the interviews was from 35 minutes to 2 hours. All interviews were transcribed, and we ensured that all interviewees were anonymised. To avoid potential interpretation biases, we also collected secondary data from internal sources provided by some project stakeholders (meeting reports, steering committee presentations, emails, etc.). The selected method is abductive; the phases of the empirical investigation were alternated with theoretical reviews. The primary and secondary data were coded according to the recommendations of Miles et al. (2013).

Table 2 - List of interviews

N°	Function	Function in the project	Length
1	Communication Manager	Group Project communication	30mn
2	HR Manager	Project core team	35mn
3	EVP Transformation	Steering Committee member	80mn
4	Corporate Program Manager	Project core team	35mn
5	IT Director	Group Project core team	30mn
6	Sustainability Program Director	Project core team	45mn

7	EVP Communication	Steering Committee member	120mn
8	Pilot	Project core team	50mn
9	EVP Human Resources	Steering Committee member	40mn
10	Brand Director	Project Director	90mn
11	Communication Agency director	Head of consulting	70mn

3. CASE ANALYSIS: FINDINGS

3.1 THE NECESSITY OF *SIRIUS*' *RAISON D'ÊTRE* TO FIGHT AGAINST NEW AIRLINE DISRUPTIONS

Environmental pressures undermine the airline's right to operate

Like many airlines in Europe, *Sirius* airline is affected by the *flight shaming* movement, a movement that considers air transport as an environmental issue because of carbon emissions. The industry is therefore under pressure, with significant risks, as mentioned by one of the Steering Committee members:

“In the long term, the main risk is the disaffection of customers. We have a real economic issue here; being a major airline not transporting people anymore. (...) The company's survival can be questioned by a potential failure to transform itself and carry another message in line with today's societal concerns. And airlines are very, very much attacked by the environmental lobby. We should not respond to them or react by saying we are under attack. But we should show ourselves in a different light.”

There is a consensus in the company to say that the environmental impacts of the activity are one of the most strategic topics for the future of *Sirius*. As airlines are criticised for their contribution to climate change, they need to work on their environmental strategy and communication to protect themselves. That is one of the aspects the Communication agency director insisted on. According to him, *Sirius*'s *raison d'être* should strengthen the company's purpose in a context of a global crisis for the industry:

“I think that Sirius's raison d'être explains why society cannot do without air transport. Air transport is vital. Greta Thunberg can tell us that you can go

to the United States in a sailboat; that's absurd. But that's not enough if we don't say why it's vital and we only say that we don't want to pollute. I think it's a mistake to apologise. So, for me (...), what had to be central was to express the societal utility of Sirius. (...) Because if suddenly, we start to consider that this company is the Marlboro of air travel, sooner or later, someone will want to tax it. So, the raison d'être is to satisfy consumers but, more broadly, citizens by saying, "this company has a social utility, and the world would be worse off if it weren't there".

We can see here that the *raison d'être* was thought of as an argument to help the company redefine its utility in a context of structural disruption. But another more conjunctural disorder hit the company while defining the *raison d'être*: The covid-19 crisis.

The covid-19 crisis is a significant disruption

The covid-19 pandemic was a global disruption, especially for the air transport industry, whose activity sometimes decreased by 90%. Airlines had to explain then why they were not just tools to spread the virus but also had a societal utility. As the *raison d'être* is supposed to answer the question “Why?” *Sirius* was absent in the public debate, according to the head of the communication agency.

« But we can't say that Sirius helped us through the crisis. With the masks, they were not there; now, in the economic recovery, they are not there. We don't understand what they are here for. We don't understand whether it's good to travel, and there's no point of view on that. No point of view says: we must continue to develop air travel to preserve world peace or allow students to be world citizens. There is no vision; there is nothing at all. How can you defend aviation with that? »

Covid-19 disruption was a momentum of communication to reaffirm why an airline is beneficent from a societal point of view. *Sirius*'s incapacity to define its *raison d'être* blocked the possible communication of its utility to society.

« In a period of crisis where air transport is at risk of green bashing, we miss it. (...) We failed, surely. (...) A raison d'être is something that holds at a given moment when air transport is undermined in terms of activity, economy and

even in terms of what it represents in society. This is fundamental. I believe in it. » **A steering committee member**

If a *raison d'être* seems essential, especially during a massive crisis, *Sirius* lacked the opportunity to exploit it. There is a gap between the intuitive comprehension of the project's objectives and its realisation on the business side. This is illustrated by the fact that the *raison d'être* was not planned to be formal in *Sirius*'s by-laws.

3.2. DIFFICULTIES TO BUILD A RAISON D'ÊTRE: A PROJECT OUT OF STEP WITH STRATEGIC NEEDS

A marketing object

All the core team members agreed on writing a meaningful *raison d'être* that could be used to reaffirm the company's values and benefits and make connexions among all employees. They focus on writing a sentence that should not be a marketing baseline but the foundations of a global action plan. The project director said:

"It must be concrete in the organisation. Otherwise, if we do the opposite of what this sentence claims, or if you do not consider it when you screen the priorities and the whole action plan, your investments, your HR policy, etc., it's a marketing trick."

However, the action plan was never even drafted. Mainly because the project was stopped at an early phase, but also because whatever the project team said, it was managed only as a new communication tool for *Sirius*'s brand. Therefore, it did not have the ambition to reaffirm the company's societal utility in an activist way. Accordingly, the Project Director did not intend to write the *raison d'être* in the company's by-laws. It was more a question of creative branding.

"And besides, there was never any question of putting this raison d'être in the status." **A steering committee member**

A lack of employees and steering committee involvement

The co-construction method focused on a small group of employees selected by the project manager rather than calling for all employees' collaboration. The agency director explains:

“Calling for all employee's participation is trendy, but it's huge bullshit. It just doesn't work (...). Pretending that we are being creative and that the idea will be better because of the number of participants... Everything shows the opposite. Everything shows that the more we are, the more we will fall into a soft consensus.”

A panel of employees from all the airline's central business units was selected to contribute to the three workshops. However, the core team and the top management didn't feel comfortable with this method. Indeed, team members sometimes think that the agency pushed too hard on their ideas, asking not for collaboration but only for corporate validation, as said by a project core team member:

“We had the impression that somehow, things were premixed, and we were then fed. I expected to do some thinking, analysis, and creative work, but we were served something that was already pre-digested. Not only premade, but already pre-digested.”

There was, therefore, a lack of consensus on the method, also felt by members of the steering committee. Members of the steering committee also told us that they were not involved enough in the project:

“We didn't work; we weren't involved in the heart of the project. I remember the talks we had, etc., but similar work was done with the agency in a small committee. Then, they came in front of the steerco to present their findings, but there was no real exchange. It wasn't collaborative.”

Since the beginning, the management team seems to be misaligned on how to lead the project and engage employees within. Most of the Steering Committee's members favoured a broad collaborative project, but the decision was made to present conclusions in a few months for a Board of directors. The short planning imposed a more direct method to drive the project.

“We did this project at low cost, in fourth gear. I think it's a pity not to do it more collaboratively. But no, no, you had to go quickly. You need to have your raison d'être for such a date. So psshhh, we're doing an accelerated process with two working groups and a Steerco for validation” **A steering committee member.**

A project far from operational realities

Defining a *raison d'être* is a challenging exercise that requires introspective work and insights into values and cultural background. That kind of work is far from day-to-day management habits for an airline, where operations and D-day objectives drive the business. This “step back” from the daily business was one of the most challenging aspects of the project, especially in an organisation in which most employees are engineers or have a technical background, as the Project director claims:

"I think it's also cultural (...). I'm not saying that engineers have difficulty decentring themselves, but they are immediately focused on “what”, on the process. So, this stepping back may have seemed a bit philosophical."

Or a steering committee member:

"We are an engineering company that has much trouble understanding these subjects, that are not just numbers, processes and KPIs."

These interviews revealed two main ideas: a global “engineering mindset” that created a reluctance. In a way, this project was not seen as a priority for Top Management compared to daily operational activities. Therefore, we observed a lack of commitment from *Sirius*'s Executive Committee, and this commitment could also be kept at a governance level.

Airline vs. Group *raison d'être*: governance's issues

While *Sirius* was working on its *raison d'être*, Top Management at *ABC Group* started to work on the Group *raison d'être*. A new issue emerged: should the group and one of its airlines work simultaneously on their *raison d'être*? Should the airline's *raison d'être* be a declination of the Group's? Those questions were asked while the airline's *raison d'être* was at the last validation step. It became then both a reason and an argument to stop the project for a Steering Committee member:

"It also seems that at the same time, a few months later, the Group said, "ah well, we also need a raison d'être". So, they stopped Sirius's raison d'être, which had just had some results. I think this was a perfect example of how dysfunctional we are in terms of governance in this company."

However, another Steering Committee member explained that they took the Group as a pretext to stop a project that was not good enough for the airline:

“That's the explanation we gave when we explained why we didn't keep it. But the real issue is that it wasn't up to the company's standards. It couldn't be because of how it was done.”

It mainly was an argument to stop the project, but people from the project core team were not all aware of it. As the project stopped during its last validation step, they only knew that top management decided not to communicate about it. A project core team member told us:

“No, we were not told. It's a pity. Afterwards, there were certainly excellent reasons. But as we had dedicated time and that we had all invested in this project, we saw that it wasn't released. Well, okay, we all speculated about why it wasn't released. But can you tell me?”

Tensions inside the organisation made it challenging to build a *raison d'être* that is consistent for the airline and the group, as said by a Steering Committee member:

“It's the whole paradigm of group governance. Are we operating companies and holding companies? Are we several big brand groups? It's this unclear governance that's hidden behind it.”

That mainly embodies the organisational complexity between the different airlines of the group.

*“Then came the question of the group's *raison d'être*, which I think is a dead-end because we don't have a group identity. The group is a holding company. Not in reality, but we have very, very strong corporate identities.”* **A project core team member**

Therefore, the project's purpose was also unclear in the context of opaque governance. We observed a tension between what should be a strategic ambition and what has been done as a new communication opportunity.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

4.1 RESULTS INTERPRETATION

Writing a *raison d'être* is hard when outsourced

The process of building a *raison d'être* has not been very much studied by scholars, especially for established companies. This case draws a first step on how legacy companies can take advantage of these legal innovations and use them in a context of institutional disruption. *Sirius's* case shows that a *raison d'être* is not a branding asset but a manifest to explain the benefits provided to society by the company. Indeed, the first *raison d'être* proposed to *Sirius's* Executive Committee has been judged “*inappropriate*”, “*too namby-pamby*”, and “*good for the Catholic Church*”. If the main idea was broadly shared (the idea of connecting people as an airline), the chosen words were not approved, mainly because they did not resonate with *Sirius's* cultural background. It was a tagline more than a *raison d'être*. A communication agency can understand the institutional pressures, but it cannot embrace all the corporate identity of its client as if it was part of the company. A *raison d'être* is not a branding tagline. It should be customised, culturally integrated, and makes consensus within the company. It affects the identity of the organisation. That is why the process of writing a *raison d'être* might be difficult to outsource to external consultants. It requires an internal introspection entirely led by C-level management that should probably involve a maximum of employees.

Writing a *raison d'être* can be helpful in a context of institutional disruption as it remains the societal utility of the organisation.

In a context of flight shaming disruption that criticises the right to operate for airlines, a *raison d'être* looks relevant to strengthen their defensive discourse. Indeed, writing a *raison d'être* brings out fundamental arguments that could have been forgotten. The daily operational life does not facilitate discussions on “why” an organisation should exist or not. Therefore, writing a *raison d'être* obliges leaders and communications officers to focus on their organisation's old yet essential aspects. In a way, creating a *raison d'être* helps to make explicit why an organisation is beneficial to society. This is what *Sirius's* management teams missed during the crisis. Therefore, a *raison d'être* can help people from the disrupted organisation focus on new communication forms to fight against institutional disruption.

Writing a *raison d'être* can only help fight against institutional disruption if created as a strategic project.

The tension between strategy and marketing on the *raison d'être* has been at the heart of many discussions between *Sirius*'s management teams. The uncertain positioning has created a misunderstanding of the project's goals. Therefore, top management did not prioritise the project, and it ended as a failure, mainly because they were in the context of multiple crises. As *Sirius*' *raison d'être* was built as a new kind of advertising project, top management did not seek the opportunity to use it as a strategic asset to fight the disruption. It explains why they also were reluctant to include the *raison d'être* in the company by-laws. Without strategic ambition, a *raison d'être* cannot be fully used. In *Sirius*'s case, we contribute by insisting on the fact that to be efficient in a context of crisis, writing a *raison d'être* should be part of a more global project about strategy and governance.

4.2 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study allows us to propose theoretical contributions to both literatures on *raison d'être* and institutional disruption.

Regarding the literature on *raison d'être*, our study contributes by associating it with the concept of mission statement (Grimes et al., 2019) and by exploring the process of writing a *raison d'être*. This is the first case highlighting the operational process of writing a *raison d'être*, especially in a legacy company that does not claim to become a “profit with purpose corporation”. This is one of the first steps a legacy organisation can take to reinforce its societal impact while integrating new assets from innovative legal forms (Segrestin et al., 2021). To succeed, it must follow some methodological steps that haven't been clarified in the literature. Collaboration, employees, and top management's involvement look very important and should be part of much deeper research. The study also shows how difficult it can be to define a *raison d'être* in a context that is not sought as a strategic asset. A *raison d'être* for a legacy can then quickly become an unnecessary tagline.

Secondly, we contribute to the recent literature on *raison d'être*, especially for big European organisations, by showing that a *raison d'être* can be a reminder of their identity. Our case also sheds some light on the difficulties between the *raison d'être* of a group and its subsidiary. It was not studied yet in literature. But our case mainly explores a new angle where a *raison d'être* tries to explicit an organisation's identity to its stakeholders and the public opinion in a context

of institutional disruption (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). When the institution is under pressure, challenged or disrupted, a company that is part of it can use its *raison d'être* to defend itself. It confirms what Valiorgue (2020) argues about the necessity of a *raison d'être* as the source of corporate life in a new context.

Regarding the literature on institutional disruption, our case illustrates how a *raison d'être* can be a reminder of the societal benefits of the organisation. In a way, it helps as a discursive tool, as described by Zilber (2009). A *raison d'être* that is not built as a strategic asset but as a marketing baseline creates the narrative pillar on which to build storytelling to resist institutional disruption. Moreover, drawing on Lok and de Rond (2013), a *raison d'être* could also be read as a “reflexive normalisation work”: a non-very conscious and intentional work to help the institution through the normalisation of practices or interactions. *Sirius*'s case shows, therefore, that a discursive tool for reflexive normalisation work contributes to the institution's defence. Nevertheless, a *raison d'être* built as a strategic asset would be more impactful, as defined by Valiorgue (2020). A *raison d'être* that has governance and organisational implications could become the foundation of a discursive strategy intentionally built to protect the institution, especially in an outsider-driven institutional disruption.

4.3 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The failure of *Sirius*'s case also has several managerial implications.

First, it highlights how a CEO's sponsorship looks key to defining an organisation's *raison d'être*. In this case, a commitment at the highest level is a critical factor in success: the whole Executive Committee should be involved in the process.

This study also shows how employee involvement is critical in the process. They could be part of the project through creative workshops, polls, or appropriation meetings. But as seen in our case, a company that defines its *raison d'être* only with a communication agency and ten employees as an excuse for collaborative work will probably fail. Making explicit the identity will help employees fight for a company, its values, and its actions.

Finally, as seen in a context of disruption, this study shows how a *raison d'être* could help an organisation build a strategy based on discourses to defend its values and benefit society. It would help create a cohesive spirit and make people conscious of the well-funded of their activity. It could be a powerful tool to help an organisation protect itself and its institution during a disruption.

4.4 LIMITATIONS AND AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Our study contains several limits.

First, our study focuses on a project that failed. Further research should probably investigate other cases to explore how a *raison d'être* could be born in an established company and use a longitudinal analysis to analyse deeper the impact of a *raison d'être* during an institutional disruption.

Secondly, this paper focuses on the air transport industry facing recent disruptions. We may lack some distance to understand this environmental disruption. Therefore, a case of creating a *raison d'être* in a sector that has been disrupted for longer could give more relevant results.

Finally, regarding institutional disruption, an exploration of how a successful *raison d'être* could be used against institutional disruptors would be necessary to understand better how it could be used. A case where a *raison d'être* was purposefully built and used as an instrument in a crisis or disruption could give new insights to complete or challenge this research.

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