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SELECTED ELEMENTS OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION

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Purpose: to highlight the importance of contact with the media and those affected in crisis situations. Furthermore, the aim is also to demonstrate that effective communication with the media in a crisis situation is essential, if only because the media are the fastest and most effective channel for reaching a message to a wide audience.
Design/methodology/approach: To achieve the objective outlined above, several theoretical methods were employed, primarily literature review, comparison, abstraction, synthesis, induction, deduction and inference.
Findings: Social media is becoming an increasingly popular communication platform; however, it is traditional media that is expected to provide reliable information in emergency situations. Communication management within an organisation consists of closely interlinked and interdependent processes. On the one hand, effective communication enables the proper dissemination and exchange of information and knowledge; on the other hand, effective communication is determined by the level of development and the type of organisational culture, as well as the individual approach and the attitude of individual people towards it.
Practical implications: Recognising these relationships and interdependencies, and then properly addressing these related aspects of management—including, in particular, the correct communication process in crisis situations—is an extremely important task, and indeed a challenge for contemporary science and practice.
Originality/value: The text is original, and the conclusions can be developed and used to creatively continue good practices within organisations.
Keywords: crisis situations, crisis management, crisis communication.
Category of the paper: conceptual article; general review.

1. Introduction

An organisation may find itself in a crisis situation, or it may provoke a crisis itself either unintentionally or intentionally (e.g. deliberate violation of the law or ethical principles). The dynamics of social media and the online environment mean that the course of a crisis may be less predictable, and the audience more emotionally involved, which makes it difficult for the organisation to take appropriate action. Applying an appropriate strategy is difficult because

crisis situations are not always easy to categorise based on their typology (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2019). An image crisis may develop into a media crisis, i.e. public exposure through the media. When a crisis situation arises, regardless of whether it concerns the private or public sector, a phenomenon of a permanent lack of information emerges (Grzegorczyk, Kościańczuk, 2012). Therefore, the main task of a company or public administration staff is to provide communications that would either improve the public image of the organisation (public relations) or the product (marketing), or reduce the scale of the incident, thereby protecting both the health and lives of citizens (crisis management).

Every crisis management operation involves issues of great public importance. This carries the risk of very negative consequences, which attracts widespread public interest. One of the defining features – which also fuels curiosity and the need for rapid access to information – is the suddenness of the crisis, as it is difficult to predict. By the time an organisation realises what has happened, many negative consequences may already have arisen. A lack of information – as well as the impression of an ineffective response from the emergency services, caused by limited resources – creates significant social tension. The possibility of a direct threat affects both the organisation and its surroundings. Attempts to bring the situation under control, coupled with heightened emotions among those directly or indirectly involved, may cause tensions that affect the effectiveness of actions. Problems in finding common ground can lead to increased spontaneity in actions, which will lack a comprehensive approach.

The weakest link in crisis management is the public, customers and the external environment, as their behaviour is difficult to predict. In extreme cases, this behaviour may escalate into aggression towards those intervening. During a crisis, each party involved attempts to find someone to blame (Grzegorczyk, Kościańczuk).

Communication within an organisation plays a consistently and invariably significant role in organisational management, but above all in achieving safety objectives. Crisis situations heighten the importance of the process of creating and disseminating information, giving it particular significance; moreover, the manner in which communication is conducted directly translates into the best and most effective resolution of a specific crisis . One element of crisis management is the organisation taking action to minimise the negative effects of the crisis. This is possible provided that the organisation has in place mechanisms for managing information and an efficient communication system are in place within the organisation, so that accurate and as complete as possible information reaches the public as quickly as possible, using all available technical means.

2. Results

At this point, it is important to highlight the key **methodological aspects**. Communication in crisis situations refers to both internal and external communication. Internal communication concerns the flow of information within an institution; external communication involves communicating with the external environment. Both types of communication are conducted with the aim of preventing or limiting the development of a crisis situation, responding to and managing it, minimising its negative effects, and restoring the situation to its pre-crisis state. Crisis communication takes place on two levels:

a) The information level – this is a key level in crisis management, involving the collection, analysis and dissemination of information during a crisis.
b) The level of meaning – this encompasses the symbolic level and determines the impact of messages on the perception and interpretation of the crisis, as well as the image of the institution during a crisis (Coombs, 2014).

Crisis communication, or more precisely its objectives and functions, can be based on the four phases of crisis management, namely:

Prevention phase – this involves *risk communication*, i.e. communicating about a predicted threat, its severity and potential negative consequences, or instructing people on specific behaviour. These are therefore all actions taken to prevent a crisis situation from arising, including actions in the area of law-making and law enforcement.

Preparation phase – this involves planning and organisational activities designed to prepare for the occurrence of a crisis. In this phase, the key tasks are and assessment of the threat, and information is circulated within a closed loop, meaning that messages from external units are channelled to the crisis management team, where they are processed in accordance with crisis management plans appropriate to the given level via internal communication channels. Information conveyed in the form of monitoring, reports or bulletins is analysed, and operational procedures are determined on this basis to carry out the necessary actions. At this stage, a spokesperson or another person authorised to issue statements should be appointed (Marszałek, Sobolewski, Majchrzak, 2013). The actions undertaken and implemented in this phase are more effective when preceded by effective measures taken in the prevention phase, e.g. comprehensive public education, raising awareness about existing threats and appropriate behaviour during a crisis, and the strengthening of preventive measures (Pieczywok, 2014).

The response phase – encompasses actions taken at the onset of an incident, aimed at providing assistance to those affected and minimising losses. The initial phase of a crisis is characterised by chaos, uncertainty and significant media attention. Information is usually incomplete and may even come from unreliable sources. Overload of ICT systems can contribute to communication chaos. Hence, key actions will include gathering and verifying information and messages, coordinating activities with other response teams and services, and providing the public with clear and factual messages. An information point or helpline is also organised to advise on how to proceed in the current situation, how to obtain assistance,

and what actions will follow once the crisis has subsided (*Crisis Communication Handbook. Fundamentals of Information Management in a Crisis*, 2017).

Recovery phase – during this phase, measures are taken to restore the situation to its pre-crisis state. The public expects support, including emotional support; therefore, understanding and compassion must be shown to those affected by disasters. Psychological support is particularly important in this phase.

It can be summarised that crisis communication directed at the public serves mainly an informational and educational function, aimed at protecting the population from the effects of the crisis. Communication at an emotional level naturally plays an important role, e.g. reassuring a confused community and expressing sympathy.

Risk can be defined as a concept comprising both objective factors, such as mortality, and subjective ones, such as human emotions. Risk communication should take both sets of factors into account. This can be illustrated by the example that, for instance, what sometimes causes anxiety and fear in society appears, according to experts, to be harmless. An illustration of this is the situation where most nuclear power plant accidents are assessed by specialists as posing no threat to human life or health; nevertheless, news of such an incident sparks rumours that can easily escalate into panic (*The Book of Crisis Communication 2024. Theory and Practice,* 2024). On the other hand, there are situations where experts try to alert the public, who nevertheless downplay the threat. The public therefore perceives threats subjectively; for example, people fear a terrorist attack, whereas most accidents occur at home. This state of affairs is due to the fact that experts and the public perceive and assess threats according to different criteria: specialists analyse the death toll resulting from a disaster, whilst people assess the threat based on the following factors:

- voluntariness: risks taken voluntarily are more acceptable to people than risks they are forced to take,
- source: people are more inclined to accept the consequences of natural disasters than human error, e.g. government mistakes,
- memory: an event that is firmly etched in the memory makes the risk easier to imagine; for example, we remember media reports of air disasters, which gives rise to a fairly widespread fear of flying,
- fear: emotions shape attitudes towards risk; for example, people are more afraid of contaminated water than air, even though there are more pollutants in the air,
- control: people tend to behave in a riskier manner in situations they can control, e.g. a driver reacts differently to high speeds than a passenger,
- duration: people regard the risk of a sudden disaster more seriously than the long-term effects of a particular threat, e.g. the effects of smoking,
- diffusion in time and space: society fears events threatening its immediate surroundings in the near future more than a distant disaster in a remote corner of the world that results in numerous casualties,

- familiarity with the threat: people underestimate threats they are familiar with; for example, they do not consider driving a car to be a significant threat, whereas flying in an aeroplane causes anxiety,
- moral judgement: the distinction between threats that are morally insignificant and those that are morally significant (e.g. the evolution of perceptions of racial discrimination over the years) (Sasińska-Klas, 2016).

Risk communication is hampered by a number of factors linked with the perception of risk, namely:

- people tend to deny or dismiss the actual risk,
- many people do not take the existing risk seriously enough,
- when deciding how to respond to a threat, people take too many factors into account,
- many people are unable to understand the complexity of the situation or the message about the threat,
- the threat may seem too diffuse, abstract or inevitable,
- the community affected by the threat may be overly diverse, e.g. in terms of access to or trust in the media,
- informal social and personal networks sometimes downplay or sideline formal and official messages about threats,
- messages regarding the crisis may reach the community too late,
- messages may be conveyed to a community awaiting essential information via an inappropriate medium, which is not received by the community or, for various reasons, does not reach it (Sasińska-Klas, 2016).

Based on the above, it can be concluded that the effectiveness of communicating about threats depends on a number of factors. Media coverage plays a significant role in risk communication. The mass media tend to report about events with tragic consequences, often exaggerating the coverage whilst ignoring potential or creeping threats (Olejnik, 2017). Information conveyed in this way influences the audience, who ignore some threats whilst fearing others, exaggerated by the media, which in fact rarely occur in their environment.

From a **practical point** of view, it can be said that risk communication encompasses two types of activities:

- activities aimed at alerting the public, highlighting the reality of a threat, and carrying out preventive and educational measures to encourage appropriate behaviour, e.g. public campaigns promoting vaccination against infectious diseases or evacuation in the face of an imminent threat.
- reassuring the public and calming emotions – communicating information about crisis situations through the media helps to raise public awareness of the risks. The distribution of materials in the form of leaflets, brochures and promotional items is also a key element of communication with the public. *Printed* information materials should not be

underestimated, as in the age of the information society, when an event disrupts the reception of media coverage, it is precisely these printed materials that remain the primary source of knowledge. In order to reinforce the message regarding risks and threats, it should be conveyed through a variety of channels and sources. Local media play a particular role in this, as they are perceived as a reliable source of information (Sasińska-Klas, 2016).

As a general observation, one might note the obvious fact that contact with the media in a crisis situation is essential, if only because the media are the fastest and most effective channel for reaching a wide audience with a message. Although social media platforms, such as Facebook or 'X', are becoming an increasingly popular form of communication, traditional media are still expected to provide reliable information in emergency situations. The following functions arise from this relationship:

- **informational** – the media convey information based on the audience's needs to ensure appropriate behaviour in emergency situations. An event not reported by the media does not exist in the public consciousness, and the media's informational function is closely linked to changes in public attitudes. Society expects the media to provide reliable information, particularly during a crisis, when information plays a vital role. Alerts and announcements broadcast by the media also fulfil this informational function. (Wiśnicki, 2018).
- **opinion-forming** – the media shape public opinion in various areas of life. The mass media play a huge role in shaping public opinion and people's behaviour. A message that reaches the audience via the media not only shapes their worldview but also influences their perception of the world. Thus, the mass media raise public awareness of creeping threats. On the other hand, the media may exaggerate certain events that do not directly threaten a given community; for example, fear of rising crime is linked to the frequency of watching news and television programmes, although the actual level of safety in Poland is satisfactory. The opinion-forming role of the media stems from the fact that audiences do not question the message conveyed by the media, but accept it as true. Crucially, it is the media that decide which information will be conveyed and which ignored, thereby directing the audience's attention to a specific issue and its narrative (Andersen, Taylor, 2008).
- **correlative** – the media interpret the motives behind actions taken by institutions, explain problems and justify decisions made, enabling an understanding of the symbolism of events, an understanding of the modern world, knowledge of the laws governing institutions and their functioning, and the mechanisms at play; they facilitate socialisation, promote established values and norms, and support specific authorities.
- **educational** – the mass media produce and broadcast educational programmes, creating educational value by building a society of knowledge and skills. In particular, the media play a key role in delivering educational content to a wide audience, enhancing learning

abilities, and improving professional and life skills, including in the field of safety (McQuail, 2007).

- **mobilisation** – the media mobilise society to take action, support preparedness in emergency situations, as well as political engagement. The media also stimulate social action, particularly in the spheres of politics and economic development (McQuail, 2007).
- **monitoring** – the media publicise the actions of political elites and other actors in social life, particularly those that are inconsistent with their declarations or break the law. Therefore, the media act on behalf of citizens, strengthening their position as a force to be reckoned with. By performing a watchdog function, the media help to raise awareness of unethical activities by political actors and those in power, which could hinder crisis management. Information gathered in this way can be used even long after an incident has occurred to improve and restructure future civil protection measures.
- **entertainment** – they offer audiences entertainment content that allows for relaxation and a break from problems (McQuail, 2007).

3. Discussion

The media undoubtedly support the functioning of organisations; however, media coverage of events and the activities of journalists can have negative consequences, such as:

- the media can be a source of widespread information chaos; this is particularly true of social media platforms, which are characterised by an excess and inconsistency of information;
- media coverage may not be accurate, and information may be exaggerated. News outlets may highlight a single isolated incident, suggesting that the situation is widespread. During emergencies, such cases most often involve spreading panic, looting and other forms of crime or deviant behaviour;
- the media contribute to the politicisation of emergency situations, as they exert pressure on decision-makers and public administration, which may result in hasty and chaotic actions that should be determined with caution. Politicians, on the other hand, may exploit media interest to promote their own political agendas. Consequently, such reporting leads to the polarisation of public opinion and a search for those to blame for the damage caused by the event;
- journalists focus on sensational news, as this sells better. Photographs may be deliberately framed to show destruction, and the image presented may not be entirely objective;

- the sudden arrival of large numbers of journalists at the scene of an incident can pose not only a logistical challenge and cause additional damage due to so many people being in one place, but also lead to a lack of respect for privacy and disrupt or hinder the work of emergency services;
- the work of emergency services is more stressful when their every move is recorded and commented on in the public sphere, and their decisions are questioned. The media also frequently broadcast interviews with critics of the actions taken by the services or the administration;
- by showing frequent broadcasts, for example, of disasters and natural catastrophes occurring around the world, the public may become less interested in global issues due to the perceived tragedy of the events and their own sense of helplessness. In this way, media coverage has a negative impact on public altruism (McQuail, 2007).

Social media can be considered separately, as it can sometimes have a negative impact on crisis situations in the broadest sense. Despite the numerous benefits of using social media in emergency situations, there are, however, a significant number of problems associated with its use. During serious incidents, there is a lack of up-to-date and reliable information; many posts or *tweets* are published, but they are usually chaotic, redundant, inconsistent and unreliable. Consequently, the reliability of information can be problematic due to false rumours or misinformation. It is argued that the volume *of* so-called *'fake news'* is limited by the users themselves, who react promptly to false information and correct obvious distortions. In this context, *retweets* serve as a mechanism for assessing the validity of information. Furthermore, the collective intelligence of the audience serves to correct false messages, as they themselves take great care to ensure the reliability of sources (Nowicka, 2023).

Publishing a large number of posts on a crisis situation may, on the one hand, lead to information chaos and the aforementioned problem of disinformation and the spread of fake news, but on the other hand, it can serve as a source of information on current operations and the measures taken by the emergency services. Importantly, information from social media platforms may be misinterpreted, if only due to an excessive amount of data (Domalewska, 2020).

The communicative situation occupies an important position in the media. The sender seeks to reduce communicative distance by establishing a shared place and time; to achieve this, journalists most often employ specific scripts and communicative scenarios, or select the style and genre of expression most appropriate to the form of contact they have created (Nowak, Tokarski, 2007). The first of the methods for creating a communicative situation has been outlined above; the second involves establishing a dialogue and emphasising colloquial style by increasing the number of vulgarisms and blunt statements. The linguistic worldview, or cultural creation, leads to an understanding of the information contained in the message. Rationality is determined by colloquialism, which, as a cultural rather than a normative

category, is embedded in the linguistic assumptions of the worldview and is, at the same time, the fundamental style of media communication (Nowak, Tokarski, 2007).

The form of media messages is strictly dependent on the audience, and every information provider should take the audience's preferences and tastes into account. The media should strive to attract viewers; consequently, media language is becoming increasingly expressive, with publications breaking the rules to draw attention to themselves. To achieve the desired effect, measures such as the following are employed:

- the promotion of linguistic kitsch,
- neutralising the formal relationship between sender and receiver,
- the dumbing down of communicative competence,
- linguistic inertia among some journalists who regard their own language and that of their immediate surroundings as the standard and in need of no correction,
- the overuse of vulgarisms and crude expressions.

Currently, the media are geared towards communicating and influencing the reception of messages determined by the sender. They are fulfilling an informational function to an ever-decreasing extent, whilst increasingly presenting entertainment. They shape an image of the world that is not directly accessible to the audience (Wojtak, 2010). Press discourse operates within the broader framework of media discourse, yet the two differ in certain respects. Media messages are characterised by subjectivity and individualism, which is not evident in journalistic reports; yet in both cases there is a vision of the world in which communication takes place between the sender and the recipient (Wojtak, 2010).

4. Summary

A large number of authors of publications on communication in crisis situations assume that a crisis is a negative phenomenon, usually a one-off event that must be overcome in order to return to the baseline state. Furthermore, a crisis situation is not treated as a process, but as a state in which the organisation finds itself and which must be resolved in both technical and symbolic terms (perception and communication). This results in research into what a crisis is, how it negatively affects an organisation, and what strategies can be employed to restore stability. In their deliberations, the authors focus on seeking and proposing solutions that enable the redefinition of the perceptions held by those affected by, or who feel they are affected by, the consequences of a crisis, with the aim of helping them adapt to the current situation or restore the pre-crisis state.

Meanwhile, a crisis or the threat of a crisis should be used to bring about change. Most threats have significant transformative potential and can lead to the introduction of new solutions that will increase the organisation's productivity and efficiency. The emergence of

a crisis should therefore serve as an impetus to move away from maintaining the organisation's status quo in favour of change and continuous development.

Among the many characteristics of a crisis situation, one of the most significant is the growing demand for information. Unfortunately, this interest is most often accompanied by information chaos, the presence of uncertain, false and contradictory information. This situation can be felt by all communication partners and usually contributes to the escalation of the crisis. Hence the general conclusion that there must be no delay in providing information to the key stakeholders involved in the incident. This demonstrates that we are aware of the situation and are already responding to it. Communicating through the mass media provides an opportunity to issue a preliminary statement or present one's position in greater detail – for example, during an interview or a press conference – and this allows one to establish oneself as a source of reliable information. It is also important that we have the opportunity to present an objective picture of the incident and define the scope of the discussion, whilst indicating the communication channels that are important to us.

On the other hand, when communicating with the media, one must not forget that they act as an intermediary through which we convey information to the public. For this reason, it seems essential to define the objectives to be achieved, the target group and select the best method of conveying the information. The fundamental recommendation for those liaising with journalists is to be well prepared, as rebuilding an image once it has been lost is practically impossible in a crisis situation; and if the person responsible for crisis management loses face, the crisis escalates rather than being resolved.

It was noted that during crisis management, direct contact with those affected often occurs, for example when visiting the scene of the incident. This is a crucial form of activity, as it enables one to make one's own assessment of the situation and to develop decisions regarding the restoration of normality. It also helps to build awareness among those affected that they have not been left alone to deal with a situation that is beyond their ability to cope with.

Communication plays a huge role in shaping power relations, inequality and domination. Language can serve as a tool for influencing people. Manipulative and propaganda techniques are used to strengthen political power and influence society. Meanwhile, mass and social media are used both to inform and to influence public opinion.

As mentioned earlier, communication plays a key role in crisis situations, as it helps, for example, to prevent such situations, ensures effective management to resolve them, and also helps to mitigate the crisis, minimise the damage incurred and restore the situation to how it was before the event. Conversely, ineffective communication can exacerbate a crisis or trigger another one, this time a reputational one. In the context of the lessons learned and certain "benefits" arising from the crisis within the organization, the following can be highlighted:

- Faster improvement of processes and contingency plans; identification of gaps in business continuity and communication.
- Building trust and reputation through transparency, empathy, and effective corrective actions.
- Instilling a culture of openness and accountability within the organization, which translates into better internal collaboration and engagement with stakeholders.
- Advancement of scientific knowledge: practical cases provide data for testing and developing theories, thereby expanding the field of crisis communication.
- Better alignment of the message with the audience and the real needs of stakeholders, which helps avoid information overload and reduce reputational costs.
- The opportunity to use a crisis as a catalyst for innovation in risk management, digital communication, and employee training.

It's also worth noting the issue of innovation, which in this case involves:

- combining AI and real-time monitoring with incident management and integrating data into a single situational view,
- chatbots, automatic updates, and decision-support tools enable consistent communication both within and outside the organization,
- priorities include transparency, storytelling, training, as well as data protection and ethical communication,
- the benefits include faster response times, greater stakeholder trust, improved coordination, and reduced reputational damage and costs.

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