The Role of Mass-Media in Triggering and Developing the Media Crisis

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Abstract: The world we live in is shaped by the mass media, which have turned into the most important institution of our society and a battlefield for the various state, organisational, personal, economic, military, religious or socio-political interests. This study aims at managing media information and communication in dealing with all moments related to the triggering and development of a media crisis. As can be seen, the contemporary communication context values the rapidity, exactness and precise direction of communication in such a way that managing a media crisis should be done with minimal loss and maximum gain. Based on the influence it has on the public, the mass-media may generate a media crisis without any real support in the organization. An accusation, a piece of news released by a credible source or by a credible media channel need not be true in order to be harmful to the organization, so much the more that it may be potentially credible. In the development of a media crisis, the press becomes the main assessor of the events.

Keywords: *mass media; crisis; organizations; image; answer.*

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1. Introduction

Based on the influence it has on the public, the mass-media may generate a media crisis without any real support in the organization. An accusation, a piece of news released by a credible source or by a credible media channel need not be true in order to be harmful to the organization, so much the more that it may be potentially credible (Anderson, 1969).

In the pursuit of the sensational, pressed by the moment when they have to go on air, the reporters may launch inaccurate or partly true news, received from unauthorized sources (eye witnesses, experts, employees) that can make ungrounded accusations to an organization. The organization was already obliged to defend itself, to demonstrate, this time with data and facts, that the piece of news was inexact

The evil was already done. Few of those who listened to the reporter's story would hear the arguments of the organization. And fewer of them will accept the arguments as true. The suspicion that the organization is hiding something has already settled in. The perception of the organization's position is given by incertitude and suspicion.

2. Theoretical Background

Mass-media love crises because they create victims and culprits. Both categories are sources for news that must rapidly be exploited and released to the public. The news industry is as competitive as any other industry. But nothing is more perishable than a piece of news and, for the mass-media nothing is more convenient than a crisis which is news. The reporters and their news agencies hunt, create, polish and release thousands of news every day. They are trained to be skeptical towards any event or story they report and towards the people they interview. The reporters are paid to be doubtful, to ask tough questions and, if they notice that the interviewed person is evasive or confused, they become worse and more skeptical (Mileti & Beck, 1975).

3. Argument of the paper

The reporters develop a kind of personality's radar. Their sixth sense help them judge and position you very quickly on the good or bad side. As a rule, the first impression counts.

When they came for the interview, the reporters knew enough data about the interviewed person and they already had a preconceived attitude. Therefore, the first words, the body language, the actions that the

interviewed person develops will automatically incorporate him into a stereotype (good or bad). Often, the reporters are wrong in their appreciations, but the first impression was already released to the readers, TV viewers and radio listeners. Other reporters, who have seen or read the news, memorize the data and, at the next interview, will treat the person as he was described by the first journalist. The second reporter will seek only for those nuances that confirm the description previously made. In a mass-communication society, *the reporter's first impression becomes already a reality* (Stone, 1992).

According to this framework of morality, the reporters tend to identify themselves with all the victims of the society. The victims of the natural disasters, of the medical malpractice, of the authorities' incompetence (police, gendarmes, mayoralty etc.) are news. The reporters will cooperate with the victims because they are the most adequate persons to provide information about the event and because they want to know them better as human beings. The report will be better received by the audience.

But, on this occasion, the young reporters will be marked by the human suffering and will have an aversion for the potential culprits. And, in order to strengthen this aversion, the potential culprits (company managers, military men, policemen, politicians, governors etc.) are little accessible to the journalists. In this context, there will be only one-sided report, the victims' one.

Mass-media interferes in the investigation of the causes leading to the crisis generation. This interference may have at least three negative aspects: obstruction of the investigation, its speeding up or its deviation to false routes (sometimes, not in all cases).

The obstruction of the investigation may occur in the situations in which the reporters admit that the inquiry may have another result than the one they released to the public ever since the beginning, and that the victims may be accused of generating the event. In this situation, the reporters may try to accuse of unprofessionalism those conducting the investigation and direct the public opinion to cease the investigations. Most of the times, the mass-media pressure leads to speeding up the investigations, out of the desire to proclaim who the culprit is and the deeds he is accused of.

4. Arguments to support the thesis

The pressure will be higher because the scandal it announces is higher (the implication of the politicians, of the businessmen or of the public

organizations) and in direct relation with the idea that a hiding or hushing up of the facts behind the “so-called” secret or confidential information is attempted (Boltanski, 1999).

The mass-media interference may sometimes lead an investigation on false routes. The massive and disorganized presence of the mass-media at the place of the action may lead to the destruction of the fingerprints and of the traces required for the clarification of the case. On the other hand, due to the merciless competition for priority in the news release, the reporters conduct their own investigations using data from the eye witnesses or presumable experts and analysts. The conclusions they reach are released to the public before the official conclusions. This fact entails a complication of the situation, the authorities being urged to blame those found responsible for the event by the mass-media.

In the development of a media crisis, the press becomes the main assessor of the events. By virtue of the status assumed – the fourth power in the state – and controlling the most important communication channel for the public, the mass-media monitors and directs the audience’s perceptions, thus becoming the main opinion-former. During the crises, the organizations will be labeled according to the manner in which their answer integrates itself in the mass-media style: rapid, emotional, recognizing and assuming the mistakes.

The non-observance of these principles entails the inclusion of the organization into those which must be subject to public contempt. It is not enough for the organization to manage technically correct an accident, an incident or another event. If the mass-media does not understand this, then the organization is in trouble because the vision of the mass-media is released to the public.

5. Arguments to argue the thesis

As long as the mass-media creates the mirror through which the society sees itself and the collection and dissemination of information is their job, it is advisable to fulfill their wishes.

It is true that the mass-media are, firstly, interested in making known some uncommon situations such as the incidents, the accidents, the catastrophes and so on. But, besides this, they may become an important support in the management of the crises as such. This support may consist in:

- contribution to the individuals' initial education (whether they are members of the organization or of the local community), before crises occurs;
- drawing attention on the risk factors both in the previous period and during the occurrence of the crisis;
- dissemination to the public of the information and of the recommendations made by the experts in the field;
- maintenance and enhancement of the public's trust in the organization confronting the crisis;
- contributions to fighting against rumors.;
- encouragement of external supporting initiatives.

Taking into consideration the support that the press can provide in the settlement of the crises, and the fact that limiting the journalists' access to the place of the crisis and to the information related to it, usually generates tendentious speculations regarding the events, it is advisable that the journalists' work should not be made more difficult through useless restrictions (Goffman, 1974).

6. Dismantling the arguments against

On the contrary, the PR specialist must consider the following suggestions regarding the support provided to the journalists in their documentation:

- prior communication to the journalists of the basic rules that have to be observed at the place of the crisis and watch over the implementation of these rules;
- personally escort the journalists and provide them with all the correct and checked information he has at his disposal; if required, organize the escort of the journalists by the members of the organization who have been trained to this end;
- if possible, facilitate the journalists' contact with the manager of the organization or operations that take place at the place of the crisis.

When releasing information about a crisis to the journalists, the PR specialist must consider the following recommendations:

- the correct information about the facts occurred is the essential rule in the dissemination of the information. Hiding information endangers the credibility of the organization and, at the same time,

- provides the best occasion for triggering the rumors that may cause much more prejudice than the consequences of telling the truth;
- the factual information is the “spine” of the communication act during the crisis: the information that does not rely on facts leads to credibility loss. These facts must be released as decently as possible, because credibility is consolidated by what it is said about people and not by displaying a lot of cold figures and statistical data;
 - the journalists, as well as other categories of public interested in the crisis evolution, must be treated professionally as regards communication. At least, the journalists expect that in such unpleasant situations (or even embarrassing) for an organization to be treated less politely and receptively. The professional behaviour towards them will make a positive impression that will influence their attitude and that of the public opinion regarding the critical situation that the organization confronts with;
 - exercise and draw up, in advance, a list of possible questions and their answers is very useful. Usually, in a crisis situation the most frequently asked questions are: what is going on? What is going to happen? What are the effects on other activities (organizations, public categories)? Has it happened before (if yes, when)? Is there a plan for limiting the effects of the crisis? If yes, which are the main points of the plan? How many people are affected by what happened? What are the costs? When did you realize that the occurring of such a crisis is possible? What have you done when you became aware of the possibility of a crisis?
 - the initial press release may disseminate immediately the following information in answer to the questions: what? (what happened); where (location in space of the event, even approximately); when? (time location of the event); how? (the circumstances under which the event occurred, if known for sure); who? (the persons implied);
 - as a rule, information about the causes of the event (why?) are not releasable, as long as they have not yet been established with certainty; on the contrary, there is a great probability that the released data might be just speculations or subjective considerations. Usually, the question referring to the causes of the crisis will receive an answer such as: *“we don’t know yet the causes, but there is a commission investigating in order to find out; as soon as the commission reaches a doubtless conclusion regarding the causes, we will give you all the details”* (Wenger, 1985).

7. Conclusions

By virtue of the status assumed – the fourth power in the state – and controlling the most important communication channel for the public, the mass-media monitors and directs the audience's perceptions, thus becoming the main opinion-former. During the crises, the organizations will be labeled according to the manner in which their answer integrates itself in the mass-media style: rapid, emotional, recognizing and assuming the mistakes.

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