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THE ROLE OF ON-LINE COMMUNICATION IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT

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Abstract:
The almost continuous crises placed in the different organizations and the need to understand them, to anticipate them or control them lead more leaders, heads of enterprises, management experts and practitioners of public relations, to worry about the "crisis management", "crisis communication" etc. Crises can harm an organization, both in terms of material losses and in the social prestige by deteriorating image (reputation). In recent decades the on-line presence of organizations experienced an expansion in the area of dialogue with target audiences, and this tool has a major effect on the perception of the organization and the public satisfaction towards the organization. Communication in virtual field should have an important role in crisis programs. This paper presents a classification of crisis situation that may occur in a vital area, namely, water supply, their impact on various factors and on-line communication strategy adopted in each case.

Keywords: crisis, communication, on-line, strategy, water supply.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the first part of this paper is descried crisis, mainly characteristics of a water crisis. The second part is about the role of on-line communication, especially social media in managing crisis situations.

2. CRISIS- DEFINITIONS

There is a variety of definitions of a crisis. In 1986, Steven Fink claimed that there are two defining features of a crisis: intensity and attracting media attention. Weiner (2006) added to these definitions a factor called "public exposure" and drew attention to the threat to an organization's reputation. Similarly, Coombs (2007) argued that "a crisis is a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat" of the organization. Libaert (2015) slightly differs as he acknowledged crises as "the last phase of a sequence of malfunctions" (as opposed to an isolated event), which nonetheless "endangers the reputation and the stability of a company". Two common, seemingly intertwined traits of those different definitions are therefore the importance of media, and reputational exposure. Reputation is "an aggregate evaluation stakeholders make about how well an organization is meeting stakeholder expectations based on its past behaviour" (Coombs, 2007). Aula's (2010) talked about how crises can damage reputations: ''reputation risk management should begin before and not after reputation crises''. Crises are visible signs of failures, which "give people a reason to think badly of the organization" (Coombs, 2007).

3. WATER CRISIS – MEANING

"Water crisis" is a widely popular expression often used to get attention at the different aspects of climate change, green economy, industrialisation and urbanization, human health and food production, economic development and regional stability. Water has an important role in every major global debate currently underway. Unfortunately for our planet, water resources dry up every day at an alarming rate. The world's population continues to grow, but population growth was not followed by an increase of freshwater resources. Across the globe reports, news, show huge areas under water crisis. This kind of news is present everywhere on internet but not only.

In order to identify and classify the relevant topics for "water crisis", a systematic search, below described, was conducted. This search uncovered more than two hundred articles published in the years 2014-2016 on the International Water Association (IWA) website. "The International Water Association (IWA) is an organisation that brings together people from across the water profession to deliver equitable and sustainable water solutions for our world" (http://www.iwa-network.org/). These articles describe events, news, concerns on wide aspects related to water utility management. The topics mostly described in articles can be clustered in four large categories that are also interconnected each other.

**Table 1:** The mostly mentioned topics on IWA' website

Climate change	Technical issues	Human factor	Contaminations
Extreme weather events	Growing competition for water resources from industry, agriculture, nature and cities	Urbanisation	Large scale contamination
Natural disaster	Not enough appropriately skilled water professionals	Population growth	Large scale pollution
Floods	Technical problems	Changing consumption patterns	Rapid spread of Zika virus infections across South and Central America
Droughts	Energy consumption	Lack of cooperation and trust	
Low rainfall	The lack of water security	Mass migration	
Water scarcity			

Source: The authors 'conclusions

The next step was done in order to prioritize related topics about water crisis. The method consisted in counting articles that contains the identified keywords. This led to a hierarchy of topics that could

define the water crisis. Thus, from a total of more than 240 articles published in 2014-2016, on IWA' website, it was found that more over than 60 contain the word "flood", more than 50 – "drought", more than 40 – "scarcity" and the last one, "crisis" - more than 20. The keywords hierarchy are presented in the Picture 1.

Picture 1: Number of articles contains specified keywords, on IWA's website
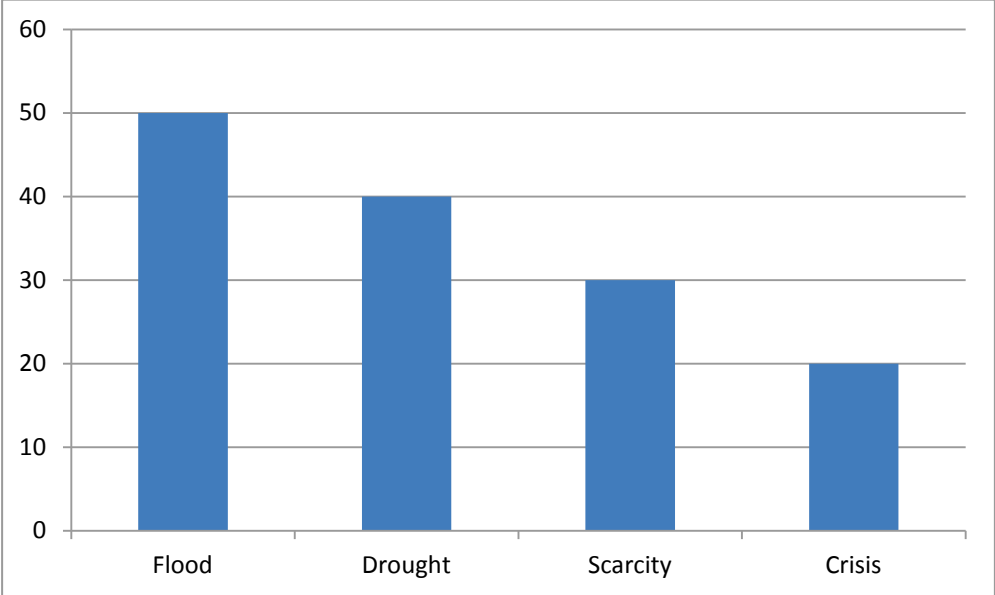
Source: The authors' method

Once it was discovered some niche keywords, the research was extended and conducted on Google's engine search which it is usually used to achieve better rankings in search engines. So, the keywords research regarding main topics mentioned above reveals that a highly mentioned on Google search engine is the word "flood" (like on IWA website). It has almost 200 million search results, meaning that millions of websites are competing for that keyword. The rest of topics are presented in Picture 2.

Picture 2: Number of articles contains specified keywords, on Google's engine search
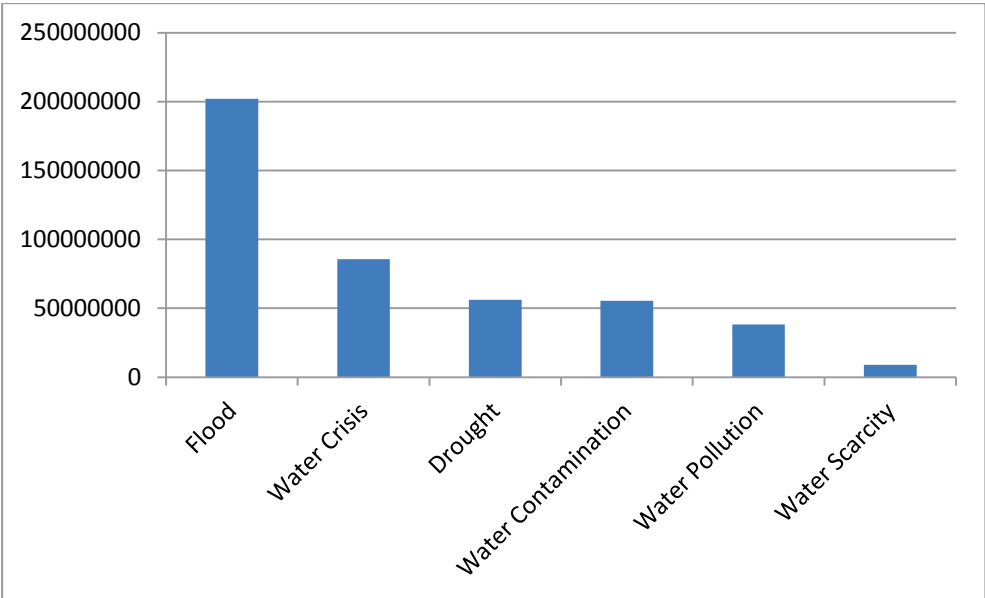
Source: The research results

4. EMOTIONS IN WATER CRISIS

Our lives are shaped by how much water we have, where we take it and how clean it is. And depending on where we live, water problems look very different - from drought to pollution until mismanagement. We can say "water crisis" can mean the difference between life and death, but may also signify the quality of our lives or our human dignity. That's why "water crisis" is an expression with a strong emotional impact.

Table 2: A few strongly represented water crisis events because of their emotional impact

2005 - Katrina Hurricane
Description: Hurricane Katrina was the costliest and also one of the deadliest natural disaster in US history (Marjanovic, Greenglass, Struthers, & Faye, 2009). According to theguardian.com more than 1,800 people died across the Gulf Coast region, which suffered more than $100bn of damage.
2015 - Brazil's worst drought
Description: São Paulo, home to 20 million people, drought got so bad that residents began drilling through basement floors and car parks to try to reach groundwater, an article from theguardian.com wrote. City officials warned that rationing of supplies was likely soon, citizens might have access to water for only two days a week.
2015 – "Implementing water supply projects for Syrian refugees in Jordan" (article on IWA'website)
Description: The ongoing Syrian civil war has forced millions of Syrian families to seek refuge in neighbouring countries and elsewhere. This vast increase in people seeking safety has further deteriorated the condition of water and wastewater services in Jordan, particularly in northern governorates, which already suffer from limited water resources and high non-revenue water.
2016 - Water and Zika Virus
Description: Zika virus, a significant public health threat, is carried by mosquitoes that reproduce in standing water. (Bewick, Fagan, Calabrese & Agusto, 2016). Because cities often do not provide enough tap water, residents collect rainwater in buckets and tanks for daily use, a factor favouring stread the virus.

Source: Selection of news on internet

When the organization and their stakeholders are impacted by a natural disaster (eg. floods, extremly weather etc), stakeholders' first reaction is to feel sad or frightened because what has been lost in the crisis cannot be recovered and the organization cannot really do anything concrete to make up for it. In the critical periods of crisis, emotional states are exacerbated mostly by the lack of transparency and honesty in organizational communication, also trust is put to the test. The companies that offered a response in accordance with their stakeholders' emotions, which is usually an accommodative response, suffered less reputational damage than those which adopted a traditional, defensive strategy. Reputation and emotions are closely related through the attribution of responsibility (Coombs, 2007).

An important role in communication process it has also the emotional capital of the organization, usually manifested in its relationships with stakeholders. This is perceived like energy of organization. Openness, honest in interactions, alertness of the organization, the involvement of employees are perceived as positive emotional energy. Apathy, inertia, alienation, inflexibility and cynicism present in an organization indicate a negative energy. (Candea & Candea, 2014).

5. ON-LINE COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT IN CRISIS

Communication is the most important component of our lives, because we are forced to communicate, especially when we live a crisis. We live nowadays in an era of information and communication, an era which, as Alvin Toffler - futurist, shows (1995), "is born from the clash of new values and techniques, new lifestyles and means of communication" (Todericiu & Faticiu, 2013). All organizations, regardless of size or object of activity, have to listen to their interlocutors and, at the same time, meet the expectations of a public characterized by diversity and exigency. The internet has changed the way companies communicate with their stakeholders and provides new opportunities for communication. Now, all organizations have their own website, easily accessible with search engines. Development of

Internet has made the information, news, rumours instantly be transmitted. What happens inside an organization today can appear immediately on You Tube, on any blog, on Twiter or on virtual media.

According to the communication model Shannon-Weaver (Chaturvedi & Chaturvedi, 2011), it is clear that communication should takes place in both directions, from the organization to the customer or potential customer, through feedback provided by the latter. Entering into dialogue with affected stakeholders, using web 2.0 tools - bidirectional communication, enables the exchange of information, providing explanations, and thus conducting to control of the situation (Candea & Candea, 2014). The guiding principles of crisis management are to develop a positive attitude towards crisis management, bring performance throughout the organization into line with public expectation. Build credibility through a succession of responsible deeds, seek and act on the opportunities during a crisis (Regester & Larkin, 2008). An organization needs to keep up with transparency which can cause negative or positive effects. Lack of transparency arouses suspicions and reduces credibility and effects reputation. A rumor, even without coverage in reality can cause disadvantages or even bankruptcy firm.. In terms of administration, providers, organizations involved in water management it is normal and natural to desire to have a good image, to be reliable. These qualities are advantages in on-line and in off-line communication processes.

5.1. Social media, the preferred channel for communication during a crisis

The on-line communication tools mostly mentioned in literature are web pages, blogs and social media websites. The last one – social media, appears to be the preferred form, allowing two-way communication. According to a research developed by Pew Research Center in 2015, nearly two-thirds of American adults (65%) use social networking sites (up from 7% when Pew Research Center began systematically tracking social media usage in 2005).
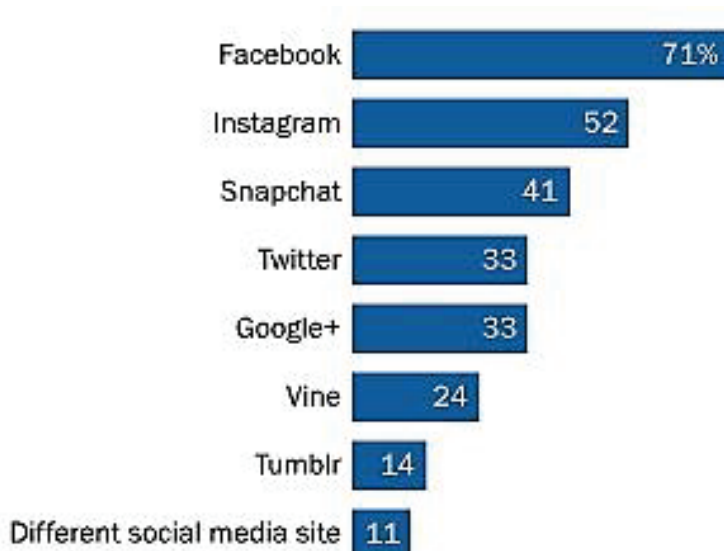
Picture 3: Social Networking Use Has Shot Up in Past Decade. Percent of all American adults and internet-using adults who use at least one social networking site
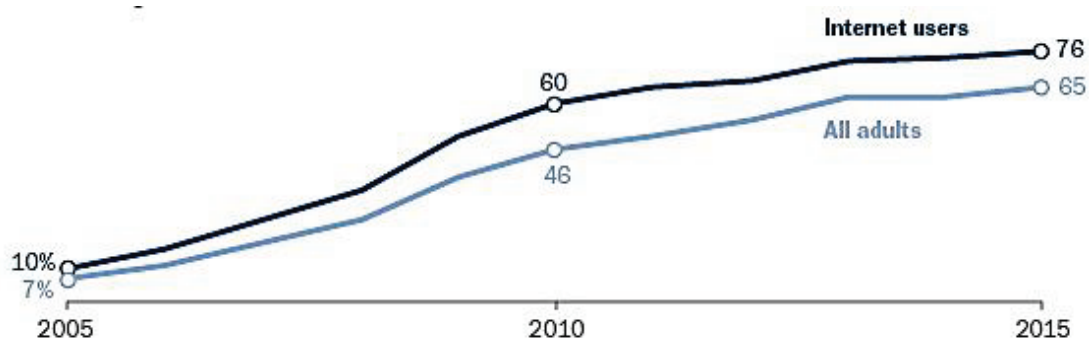
Source: Pew Research Center survey, 2005-2006, 2008-2015. No data are available for 2007.

According to a similar research, Facebook is the most popular and frequently used social media platform among teens; half of teens use Instagram, and nearly as many use Snapchat, accordind to Lenhart, Amanda, Pew Research Center, April 2015, "Teen, Social Media and Technology Overview 2015". Asked which platforms they used most often, the overall population of teens in this sample (ages 13 to 17) reported that Facebook was the site they used most frequently (41% said that), followed by Instagram (20%) and Snapchat (11%). Pew research reports have documented in great detail how the rise of social media has affected such things as work, politics and political deliberation, communications patterns around the globe, as well as the way people get and share information about health, civic life, news consumption, communities, teenage life, parenting, dating and even people's level of stress.

Picture 4: Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat Top Social Media Platforms for Teens

Facebook	71%
Instagram	52
Snapchat	41
Twitter	33
Google+	33
Vine	24
Tumblr	14
Different social media site	11

Source: Pew Research Center's Teen Relationships Survey, Sept. 25 –Oct. 9, 2014 and Feb. 10-Mar.16, 2015. (n=1,060 teens ages 13 to 17). Pew Research Center.

By using social media, companies can better understand their audience and transform raw data into knowledge; some indicators that reflect the social media sentiment of a business are established few indicators that can facilitate understanding the communication process.

Table 3: Some indicators that reflect the social media sentiment of a business

Indicators	Meaning
Attention	Time on website
Interaction	Click, Comment, or Embed
Conversation Index	Ratio between blog posts and comments+trackbacks
Velocity	Distance/Time (Rate of how fast your message is travelling in a given time) Sentiment=Tone, opinion Qualitative=What did they say? Impacts=What did they do? (influencers)' Tracking the tone, perception and nuances within online conversations is getting easier. There are a number of solutions available that monitor discussion of your brand online.

Source: Fisher, T. (2009).

5.2. Blogs - an important tool in crisis management

In a study conducted by Sweetser & Metzgar (2007) it was found that those who read blogs (personal and organizational) perceive a lower level of crisis than those who do not read blogs. Reading blogs can change the perceived level of crisis. The results of this research suggest that launching a blog in response to a crisis can indeed be an effective tool of crisis management. The fact that the organization tries to provide accurate and timely information even in the middle of a crisis can lead to more positive impression of the organization, during and after the crisis.

6. ON-LINE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Given that in some areas of the world water is already in crisis, and situations like those mentioned above will be increasingly, it is required a "special communication strategies in the water crisis". Communication in crisis situations, although it seems to be unpredictable and unstable, can often be stereotyped and therefore easier to correct especially in organizations where there is a predetermined path for the transmission of information, so being able to avoid the entrance to a crisis of communication. Develop a strategy for online communication in crisis situations is important in preventing out of control. Here is a minimum practicable framework:

Table 4: Develop a strategy for online communication, milestones

Stage	Activities
To analyse the crisis and implications: politically, economically, environmentally etc. in order to obtain decision-making information.	SWOT analysis of communication activities.
To identify issues that require communication and organization who should pay importance.	Selection of the many possible topics of communication. Analysis of the organization's current state to the desired state.
To identify relevant stakeholders and analyse them according to the degree of influence on the organization (or issues concerned) and their specific characteristics relevant to the communication process.	Drawing up lists of internal and external stakeholders, and with primary and secondary prospective. In what concerns external stakeholders is important degree of confidence, and if this level is low in the first phase on-line posts must follow increasing confidence.
To establish ethical principles or laws of voluntary commitments undertaken in developing concrete communication activities.	What is the organization willing to make in online communication, droit what is happening and what is not and what specific measures should be taken in each case, what principles will be respected in relation to stakeholders etc.
To set goals for on-line communication.	Goals should be SMART, specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time specified. The purpose of communication can be awareness, informing, influencing, persuading, encouraging the participation of stakeholders etc.
To identify the key messages	Setting a table with stakeholders, the specific messages and communication tools.
To identify the media, channels and communication tools.	Identifying media, channels and communication tools
To develop an Action Plan	For specific actions are established the responsible persons, human resources, technical indicators.
To implement of the strategy	Check if every responsible person acts properly.
To evaluate and repeat the cycle if necessary	Waiting / looking for feedback. It should be applied corrective measures if necessary. Learned lessons, Repeat the entire cycle needed.

Source: adaptation after Candea & Candea (2014).

7. CONCLUSION

Social media websites, especially Facebook, seem to be ideal tools for crisis managing because they have more frequent interventions than other on-line tools. The statements are shorter, they are directly addressed, but quickly, in a more personal and human way. It makes sense that organizations should implement "crisis strategies" that should contain interventions in a rapid way for communication during a crisis. The exposure allowed by social media comes with many exciting opportunities for businesses but also comes with new risks that of exposing constantly the organization's reputation and image. The organizations should implement more than effective communication strategies in crisis situations, they must develop a "digital culture" among employees in order to anticipate the movements of public opinion, and to react according to specified crisis situation.

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