

## MANAGING COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS DURING CRISES ACCORDING TO WILLIAM THOMAS' S SOCIAL THEORY

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**Abstract:** *Starting from the sociological theory of William Thomas which says that when people consider a situation as real, it becomes real through the consequences it produces, in this paper we intend to analyze how that works in the case of specific situations.*

*We begin with the conceptual delimitations of the main terms we operate with, according to the approaches proposed by the pioneers of the American Interactionism, the promoters of this perspective. Furthermore, we intend to analyze actual cases where this theory applies in specific situations, emphasizing the individual context and the differentiated management of the communication strategy, while tracking the obtained results.*

*The crisis situations aimed in our study can be integrated into two main categories: those manifested at organizational level and those recorded at country level, with international consequences. Nowadays society, recognized as a knowledge based one, is dominated by abundant information, that can be structured and systematized in such ways that the created scenarios can sometimes irreversible determine the destiny of individuals, organizations or even countries. This are the key elements we want to study in this paper.*

**Keywords:** crisis management, communication, situation definition, social image

### 1. Introduction

Former President of the American Sociological Association and promoter of American interactionism, William Thomas believes that all human activity is social since it occurs in a certain "situation". For the same author, the situation is "a set of values and attitudes which the individual experiences in an active process and depending on which this activity is planned, and its results are evaluated [1]".

Going forward, Thomas suggests in his book "The Child in America" a sociological theorem according to which when people consider a situation as real, it becomes real through its consequences. Appears highlighted here the importance of the social definition given to a certain situation at the expense of the concrete social fact.

Social reality appears so constructed by definition, and not necessarily by a certain occasion. This is what Robert Merton called self-fulfilling prophecy, in an attempt to explain the bank insolvency, discrimination or delinquency.

William Thomas's idea is taken over by the Romanian sociologist Ilie Badescu when analyzing a group's destiny: "If defining the situation creates or recreates the situation, it means that it is the man's power to establish the social reality of an individual or group, or to abolish it, as his desires, attitudes and interests dictate. Social groups can be annihilated, even "abolished" if you know and have the ability to manipulate their situation definition"[2].

Randall Collins sees in the sociological theorem of William Thomas the explanation of the mechanisms of power, the latter coming from the ability to control the definitions of the circumstances [3].

Real or virtual, defining a given situation undoubtedly produces many consequences that we intend to address further.

## **2. Crisis, unavoidable element in the life of any organization**

At some point, every organization, no matter how well prepared it is, may face difficult moments generated by internal or external causes, manifested in the form of crisis. Crisis situations are "event or series of events affecting the integrity of a product, reputation or organization stability, health or welfare of employees, the community or the general public" [4].

Appealing to the word etymology, many authors consider the decision as a result of the evaluation, interpretation, development of the strategy for solving a problematic situation. The decisional incapacity is translated to a period of uncertainty and poor organizational functioning.

Crisis situations are characterized by uncertainty, abnormality, disrupting the normal work flow, lack of information, sometimes panic, which can damage the quality of information by occurrence of individual "scenarios" aimed to fill the existing gap. And maybe the organization even loses control when the reality is deformed by excessive negative reinterpretation.

At such times, the institution incurs very much, because these events gain notoriety through media, which can be speculated in the interests of the organization when it can achieve an effective plan. We must emphasize here the applicability of William Thomas's theory, because the ability of the organization to define itself in relation to a crisis is crucial for further development, issues management and public perception of the institution.

The image of an organization crystallizes opinions, beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, being

a mental representation of a reality that strongly influences human behaviour in relation to that company.

According to C.H. Cooley, the image is the foundation of social order [5]. "Social images correspond to the value system compatible to culture, tradition, collective beliefs system, given social norms, and contributes to behaviour training and orientation of social communication. Social images are developed in and through communication social relationships, and is therefore considered that the dynamics of communication processes and dynamics of social images intersect with elements of the collective spirituality, including attitudes and interpretation horizon of people and social groups playing fundamental roles" [6].

Cultural differences play an important role. According to [7] KPMG International studied people's reaction to the 2009 global economic crisis and showed that while Europeans were worried and waiting for a sign from governments, companies in the Asia-Pacific area saw an opportunity in this difficult situation to review their business strategies and develop new markets. In India, China or Singapore majority of interviewed people considered that financial problems are not unusual, but part of the normal course of a strategy for long-term economic development.

Given the importance of the social image of an organization it is clear the need that the company itself provides the most accurate and correct information at the time of a crisis. The scenarios should be developed from within, communicated as quickly and efficiently as possible, so as no room is left for speculation. In the words of Thomas, the institution must define its social reality at the time X, because if it does not manage it efficiently enough, there may be other interests in shaping possible explanations that might not be profitable.

Next, we want to consider some famous cases of prestigious organizations that have experienced less desirable situations and

analyze how they reacted.

### **2.1. The Dow Chemical Case**

The second chemical manufacturer in the US, Dow Chemical, provided the US government during the Vietnam War a substance on which allegations have been made that it contains small amounts of a compound that causes cancer.

Thus, although a credible company with a good reputation, following lawsuits from veterans and complaints of the Environmental Protection Agency because of water contamination of River Michigan in 1991, Dow had become involved in a scandal, with a damaged image.

At this stage a survey was organized, to determine the public image of the company among directors, employees, media, government representatives and community leaders. Following this the image that resulted was that the company was arrogant, isolated, avoiding compromises, which led to the decision to change organizational practices and to change public perception by improving communication.

Specifically, rehabilitating Dow Chemical was aimed through:

- Opening a telephone hotline that operated non-stop through which journalists could find the information they wanted,
  - Managers' training for meetings with the press,
  - Setting up a training center in the chemical industry for journalists,
  - Sending the company researchers to answer questions relating to environmental protection, safety, chemical plants or waste management, all around the country,
  - Organizing visits to all 65 Dow Chemical branches,
  - Contributing with 1 million dollars to the National Program for Education on Organ Transplantation, every year,
  - Supporting an advertising campaign to publicize the benefits of Dow Chemical research and how other people are helped through the efforts of company employees.
- All these actions rebuilt the company's

positive image, as credible organization because the positive steps inside were accompanied by media messages for the general public.

### **2.2. The Tylenol Case**

Johnson & Johnson Company, the producer of Tylenol tablets with a market share of 37% reached 6% in a few days, after on the news was announced the death of seven people from eating pills that contained cyanide.

The company held a special telephone line to provide information to the press, ceased production of Tylenol, distribution and sales stopped and decided to withdraw the drug from the market and retest it. Those who already bought the product received coupons with which they could exchange the bottle with another unadulterated.

Due to a very good communication campaign and fast internal measures, in two weeks 90% of those surveyed knew that Johnson & Johnson was not involved in poisoning the pills, but toxic substance had been introduced after placing bottles on the shelf.

Although many marketing experts were reluctant to preserve the name Tylenol, the company decided to relaunch the product. It was designed a new box which prevents counterfeiting of medicines, steps were taken on modifying the legislation by introducing new regulations on counterfeiting medicines sold without prescription and their price reductions, sampling or distribution of coupons.

These steps demonstrate how the company has learned from the situation it was confronted with and was able to overcome this difficult time continuously communicating to the public the measures implemented, the findings and strategies that wanted to follow.

Information thirst is specific for human beings, it is the one who pushed us toward more throughout our evolution as specie. Therefore, it is best for the organization to meet this need with the information required, timely, shaping in this way its

image. According to this picture, whether real or fake, built by the company or mass media, others will interact with the organization.

### **2.3. Exxon Valdez Case**

Exxon Valdez case is a negative example of communication campaign management after the occurrence of an adverse event. The loaded tanker was heading for California when it hit Bligh Reef in Prince William Strait due to a wrong manoeuvre performed by an unqualified person, while the captain was drunk. Following the impact eight cracks appeared in the aft and 11 million tons of crude oil were spilled.

Although the Exxon Company spent more than 1 billion dollars to clean the beaches, over 11,000 miles of shoreline were affected, more than 30,000 birds and 1,000 seals died and the fishing industry in the area has been affected.

Even though it was obvious that the public needed a wealth of information after an environmental disaster of this magnitude, the company has undertaken lightly and distant problems created for one week with a policy of "no comment". This has led media to broadcast shocking images of animal suffering and oil that covered waters and land, highlighting the lack of cooperation from the company.

When Exxon officials discussed with media, 10 days after the accident, they had brief statements, allegations against officials in Alaska for not reacting efficiently and against journalists.

Following these events Exxon came down from position 8 on 110 in the USA Top Corporations, it spent 3 billion dollars to clean oil stains and paid damages of over 6 billion dollars to USA, Alaska and fishermen in Alaska.

### **2.4. The gas crisis in Europe - January 2009**

Russian-Ukrainian relations are a very broad topic and still opened, which we do not intend to address to in this paper. We only discuss the episode of the interruption of gas supply from January 2009 to support

the statement in the introduction, that destinies of individuals, organizations or countries may be influenced by communication management in times of crisis, in this case we are talking about a peak of perpetual conflict on energy resources.

What at first appeared to be a conflict between two companies: Gazprom and Naftogaz, became political dispute between two countries and then reason for a continental crisis, when in early 2009 Russia stopped supplying gas to Ukraine and Europe, on account of previous debts of the Ukrainian company. Russians asked their neighbours to accept higher prices in 2009 and accused the government in Kiev for allowing thefts from pipelines and enjoying the tacit support of US in their unfair actions against contract terms and other European countries. Ukraine also has launched a series of accusations against the adverse party, requesting increase transit fare with 70%.

Subsequently these disputes, many Europeans have suffered from reduced activity during interruption of gas, the danger of causing major social crisis determined European Union to intervene as a mediator, although it initially announced it would not want to be involved in this bilateral dispute. Finally, through the mediation of the European Commission an acceptable to both companies compromise was reached. The gas supply was resumed under more favourable auspices of contracts for Ukraine and Russia, which demonstrated the important position that the two countries still have, determining Europe to reconsider more actively the projects on energetic independence.

The two states were located on accusing positions against each other throughout the dispute in January 2009, so the media reported as negative sometimes the actions of a party, sometimes the actions of the other. The result was that public opinion has charged both, and the European Union also, for failing to ensure energy

independence, after the British or Baltics, for example, had felt the direct effects of a smouldering conflict which until then was taking place somewhere in Eastern Europe, away from them.

### 3. Conclusions

Analyzing all these situations above, the differences are obvious. Thus, while in the Tylenol case the measures taken were quick, targeted and effectively communicated to the public, permanently working with press, we can not say the same about the Valdez oil spill. In this case the offending company's reaction was slow, uncertain, marked by accusations of others and lacked transparency, leading to increased negative perception among the public.

Players of Dow Chemical strove to build a

new image, of a positive and credible company close to public needs, needs that it supports through the conducted research.

In contrast, our Russian and Ukrainian neighbours have had accusatory positions, always leaving the impression of backstage games with several international actors.

In our knowledge based society, information plays a very important role, spreads very fast and is sought by most of us.

All these cases demonstrate how the organization's ability to define itself in relation to a given situation and its ability to effectively communicate this positioning can build the company's social image, depending on which others will perceive it and perform their behaviour.

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