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Challenges and Tasks for the Press Spokesman and Public Relations Specialist in Crisis Situations in Institutional Communication in the Context of the Internet

Wyzwania i zadania dla rzecznika prasowego i specjalisty public relations w sytuacjach kryzysowych w komunikacji instytucjonalnej w kontekście internetu

SUMMARY:

Today, the Internet is an integral part of the everyday lives of many people in the world, and some of the activities of modern man are almost entirely dependent on the virtual world. Many human relationships would not exist without social media because of the long distance or the lack of physical opportunities to meet; there would be no Google maps to facilitate travel to unknown places and one could not avoid traffic jams on known routes without the Web and GPS; we would not buy many things without virtual shops; the development of artificial intelligence would not be so dynamic without Internet resources.

The list of activities that we could not undertake without virtual space is extremely long and we can no longer imagine life without communication. The Net, as the space of communication, today serves not only the purpose of obtaining valuable information, broadening knowledge or performing duties at work, but also (or perhaps above all) of communicating with other people.

The Internet and mobile devices are present in human life for several hours a day. Thanks to the Net, people move into virtual space not

only a significant part of their communication activity with friends, acquaintances and family, but also a serious part of their own existence – their experiences and reflections. It is often a task and a challenge for many institutions, because the orders of official communication and informal communication mix with each other on the Net. As a result, more and more questions are generated on the Internet, which in turn force institutions to undertake new communication strategies addressed to the environment and users of social media. A huge role in this communication is played by a public relations specialist and a press spokesman. The article is a review and its aim is to outline the issues related to communication in crisis situations and the role that the spokesman plays in crisis management. The research method is the analysis of literature available in this field, categorization of content and issues, as well as synthesis of conclusions.

KEY WORDS:

crisis management, spokesperson, internet, social media, public relations

STRESZCZENIE:

Internet jest dziś nieodłączną częścią codziennego życia wielu osób na świecie, a niektóre aktywności współczesnego człowieka są niemal zupełnie zależne od wirtualnego świata. Wiele relacji międzyludzkich nie zaistniałoby bez mediów społecznościowych z racji dużej odległości lub braku fizycznej okazji do spotkania; nie istniałyby mapy Google ułatwiające podróżowanie do nieznanych miejsc i omijanie korków na znanych trasach bez Sieci i nadajników GPS; nie kupilibyśmy wielu rzeczy bez sklepów wirtualnych; rozwój sztucznej inteligencji nie byłby tak dynamiczny bez zasobów internetu. Lista aktywności, których nie moglibyśmy podjąć bez wirtualnej przestrzeni jest niezwykle długa i nie wyobrażamy sobie już życia bez komunikacji w Przestrzeń komunikacji, jaką jest Sieć, służy dziś nie tylko zdobywaniu cennych informacji, poszerzaniu wiedzy czy wykonywaniu obowiązków w pracy, ale także (a może przede wszystkim) komunikowaniu się z innymi ludźmi. Internet i urządzenia mobilne są obecne w życiu człowieka przez kilkanaście godzin na dobę. Dzięki Sieci w wirtualną przestrzeń ludzie przenoszą

nie tylko znaczny wycinek swojej aktywności komunikacyjnej ze znajomymi, przyjaciółmi, rodziną, ale także poważną część własnej egzystencji – przeżycia i przemyślenia. Często stanowi to zadanie i wyzwanie dla wielu instytucji, ponieważ w Sieci mieszają się porządki komunikacji oficjalnej z komunikacją nieformalną. W efekcie, w internecie generowane są coraz większej liczbie pytania, które z kolei wymuszają na instytucjach podejmowanie nowych strategii komunikacyjnych adresowanych do otoczenia i użytkowników mediów społecznościowych. Ogromną rolę w tej komunikacji odgrywa specjalista public relations i rzecznik prasowy. Artykuł ma charakter przeglądowy i jego celem jest nakreślenie problematyki związanej z komunikacją w sytuacjach kryzysowych i roli, jaką rzecznik prasowy odgrywa w crisis management. Metodą badawczą jest analiza literatury dostępnej w tym zakresie, kategoryzacja treści i zagadnień, a także synteza wniosków.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

zarządzanie kryzysowe, rzecznik prasowy, internet, media społecznościowe, public relations

SPECIFICITY OF NETWORK COMMUNICATION IN THE CONTEXT OF INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNICATION

The times of electronic media and Internet communities are characterized by speed of transmission, direct communication and partnership, equal treatment of every Internet user, without any hierarchy of users in terms of their real status.¹ If something affects the way an Internet user is treated by an institution, it is their way of functioning on the Internet. Communication in the era of Web 2.0² is also characterized by greater activity of message recipients and their participation in

¹ J. Ottmar, *Cyberetica: nuove sfide o vecchi problemi?*, "Concilium" XLI 2005, p. 20–35.

² M. Pełechaty, *Spółeczności internetowe*, in: K. Pankiewicz et al., *E-marketing w akcji, czyli jak skutecznie wzbudzać pożądanie klientów i zazdrość konkurencji*, Gliwice 2008, p. 155.

building Web content. Internet users become co-creators of the content present on the Internet and gather around common topics. Every Internet user can give vent to his or her creativity by creating, for example, an author's blog or otherwise building "their own world" on the Web. Accessibility is also a feature of modern Internet communication. Services on the Internet only rarely require payment, and most of the paid services have their free equivalents. Only the use of advanced functions of the website incurs costs. This determines the style of dialogue between the user and the institution. The idea of accessibility translates into the possibility of communication with the institution to a much greater extent and much faster on the Internet than through other channels. Hierarchy is often excluded in such communication. The Internet is also characterized by intuitiveness. Web 2.0 services usually have a clear information architecture, in which the ease of access to the content is more important than the form of its presentation. In addition, it is possible to personalize the user's Internet space in accordance with the principle of "whatever I want, wherever I want" – from informative pages to social profiles. Virtual communities also create their own initiatives, such as social loans or co-deciding on the content of a given website, and finally, pathological phenomena, such as "pathostreaming."³ Observing the opportunities offered by the Web and mobile devices encourages many institutions to create a model of their own activity in the virtual space that will translate into its real success.⁴

Communication requirements of the contemporary audience are high. Young people in particular, who use the Internet every day, expect from institutions, but also from companies and other users a very efficient, professional discussion and dialogue, adapted to current standards. Therefore, traditional media and social media – in addition to being a unique opportunity – may also pose a threat and become a place generating crises. The Internet, by providing opportunities to share critical comments and negative opinions, is conducive to generating conflicts. This applies to all virtual relations, and therefore includes actions against the company and institutions that discredit its authority, while at the same time becoming a source of information for media journalists seeking sensation. Therefore, what

³ The report of Foundation "Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę" contains many valuable analyses of this phenomenon: *Patotreści w internecie. Raport o problemie*, Warszawa 2019, <https://fdds.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/fdds-raport-patotresc-www.pdf>, 29.09.2019.

⁴ A. McAfee, *Firma 2.0. Sukces dzięki nowym narzędziom internetowym*, Warszawa 2011, p. 60.

counts is: the speed of reaction,⁵ the way one acts, but also earlier preparation for these difficult situations in terms of communication. Ultimately, it is the spokesman of a given institution who represents it at a critical moment and is then identified with the institution or company, and the words spoken by him/her become the voice of that entity. Therefore, a professional spokesperson must be able to convey the essence of the position of an institution or company in a brief form – in one sentence, as expected by journalists, who want to be able to quote them later. This voice is also what the media recipients are waiting for, as they know that it is the official position of an institution.

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Professional communication between institutions and companies and Internet users requires teamwork. This is true both in normal times – in order to shape positive messages addressed to the environment, positive communication through the media, informing the public about the institution's activities, as well as in crisis times – to manage the flow of information in difficult situations. An effective communication policy is the result of the work of a spokesperson, a group of people from a press office, often a public relations specialist (or specialists), as well as the superiors of a given institution. Decision-makers must co-operate with the spokesperson so that neither they nor other members of the institution or company will provide media coverage in difficult situations without consulting the spokesperson. In times of crisis, an institution must speak with "one voice," be it the spokesperson or a superior, and in normal times have a good media policy, which is based on a professional communication management strategy. Today, it is necessary to prepare, coordinate, strategically plan and create professional, tailor-made and well thought-out messages. Such actions are necessary especially in the context of the functioning of social media. The activity of people representing

⁵ A. Łaszyn, *Kręte i proste ścieżki PR-owców do zawodu*, in: *Pierwsze ćwierćwiecze. 25 lat public relations w Polsce*, ed. A. Łaszyn, D. Tworzydło, Warszawa-Rzeszów 2016, p. 103–105.

institutions in their communication activities with their environment must take into account the ongoing changes in communication.

The issues of spokespersonship in the context of crisis situations are, *inter alia*, related to the following topics: the way the institution of the spokesperson is understood, as well as that of the public relations specialist; definition of the essence and function of the spokesperson; social and institutional conditions of the work of the spokesperson and the related limitations; professional and ethical competence of the spokesperson; organization of the press office; reflection on the ways

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and programmes and training possibilities of the spokespersons; desired personality traits of the spokespersons; model of media information management in an institution or company; determination of the relationship between the spokesperson and the superior in many dimensions of the functioning of an institution or company; issues of responsibility for communication in companies and institutions; information management, including: protection of data and information held by an institution or company; conducting “information policy”; functions performed by spokespersons in institutions or companies; proactive and reactive tools in the work of a spokesperson and a public relations specialist.

PRESS SPOKESMAN AND PUBLIC RELATIONS SPECIALIST IN COMPANY OR INSTITUTION COMMUNICATION

The multitude of models for the functioning of a press spokesperson/officer in an institution or company proves that this is an area that is still under development. There is no uniform model and no industry code of the spokesman, and the organizational practice of companies, institutions and organizations shows that the representatives of this profession have an unclear status: some of them are

employees of public relations departments and are responsible for media relations; in other organisations they are advisers and proxies to presidents or directors (or even ministers, prime ministers or presidents) and therefore hold senior management positions; in other organisational structures, press spokespersons can work in completely different segments of the organisation, and the supervisor of a department reports to the vice-president, while the press spokesperson is much lower down the hierarchy. This translates not only into the importance and rank of such a person, access to information, the possibility to participate in meetings during which the information policy of a given unit is shaped, but also influences the level of remuneration and the way journalists treat the position. Although the spokesperson is mentioned in almost all textbooks or monograph chapters devoted to the shaping of relations with the media, sometimes this function is not even called a spokesperson, but e.g. a public relations specialist, media relations expert, press officer, PR department director, junior media officer, etc. This can be the case because in Poland the knowledge of public relations is

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still slight and theories of information flow and management of this good in many companies, institutions and organizations are not always professionally adapted. As a result, confusion between the scope of duties of a press spokesperson and a PR specialist is common.

The word “communication” comes from Latin *communicare* – talking, taking counsel, consulting with someone else. It is closely related to another Latin word: *communitas*, which means not only community of people, but also camaraderie and justice in relation to each other.⁶ And it is precisely this standard of communication of the press spokesperson that is important from the point of view of institutions or companies in which the spokesman should meet the highest ethical and professional expectations. The terms spokesperson and spokespersonship

will be used in the following sense: “representing the organization externally; giving interviews on behalf of the organization; speaking publicly on behalf of the organization; image building; gaining information and management; supporting the organization’s information system; implementing the organization’s information policy; preparing statements from the authorities; preparing reports with external feedback, for example after the press release; monitoring the press; communicating with the media; organizing press conferences; organizing organization’s authorities meetings with media representatives; developing media responses and answering phone inquires; actively working with others within the organization/company (especially marketing and sales); managing a PR; supervision over cooperating PR agencies and consulting companies; organization of events and all special projects aimed at promoting and publicizing the activity of the company or its individual parts or services or products; monitoring of materials, analysis of market behaviours of competitors and the results of promotion of the company, planning the budget of materials, control of PR expenditures; preparation of information materials, brochures, leaflets, company newspapers, internal information materials; responsibility for the tasks related to the functioning of the spokesman office; communication on the profiles of the institution or the company in social media, on the website.”

The press spokesperson performs at least four basic functions: informational, interpretative, administrative-integrative, as well as educational-integrative. Using his/her knowledge, experience and competence and having at their disposal modern communication tools, including social networking sites, blogs and microblogs, Wiki tools, multimedia platforms, media monitoring, as well as positioning and optimization of the Internet presence, he/she cannot forget about the important work tool, which is the website. It enables the creation of a virtual information centre and is a reliable source of information. At the same time, a press spokesperson cannot ignore the presence of social media and focus only on cooperation with journalists of traditional media. Concern for communication in the Internet, where there are people, means also care for communication in social media.⁷

Working in press teams is a growing necessity in the era of social media and the presence of many communication tools (besides the official website of the

⁷ T. Joosten, *Social media fod Educators. Strategies and best practices*, San Francisco CA 2012, p. 79 nn.

institution with text, sound and multimedia files), and in addition, it is becoming a challenge and a task in the context of fast and professional communication with many fragmented groups and communities. It is particularly important in difficult, crisis or problem situations, which may be a threat to the organization or the company, if not managed properly.⁸ The press spokesperson, when working out, preparing and publishing information and multimedia content on the Internet, should make every effort to make this content be multiplied on the Internet. The content prepared by the spokesman should be made available free of charge to the widest possible audience, while pursuing a coherent information policy, listening carefully to the needs and expectations of both journalists and others interested in information concerning the institution. Bearing in mind the principle of communicating “with” and “towards”, about transparency of information, authenticity of the message and building relationships with journalists on the basis of limited trust, the press spokesperson should use criticism as an opportunity for development and should manage crises in such a way as to turn them into success. However, this requires proactive attitude. In choosing a press spokesperson, several criteria are important for the institution, including his or her language skills, which should be of the highest quality. For the proper functioning of the press office, journalistic and public relations experience will also be very useful.

The criterion of willingness and possibility to work is also important, but for this to happen it is necessary that the performance of this function is the main professional work of the indicated person. The criterion of teamwork indicates that at least two people are needed to create an information and promotion centre of a given institution or company. It is also important to use appropriate tools and to be aware of the obligation to communicate using multimedia. Add to this the criterion of respect of superiors towards the spokesman and the requirement to speak with one voice with the superior. The financial criterion means providing the budget for the press office, everyday work and publishing press materials, as well as conducting dialogue with the environment through social media and the institution’s website.

The proactive communication attitude of the spokesperson prevents the emergence of many media crises in the institution and has an impact on building positive relations not only with journalists but also with other people in its environment. The function of a spokesman is very important, because even one statement of the spokesperson may change the media coverage of a given event,

and consequently also the course of events and the reactions of the environment to the narration in the media.

The work of a press spokesperson contributes to building relations between the institution and not only journalists, but also with its surroundings. To perform this function one needs skills, competencies and knowledge in many areas. The function of press spokesperson is a public function.

A spokesperson – in addition to knowledge of how journalists work and how the work in the media is organized – should have a range of communication skills and knowledge including the areas of: spokespersonship, public relations, journalism, negotiations, management, marketing, etc. The knowledge, experience and communication skills of the person who is responsible for hiring a press officer and exercises authority in a given unit is also essential. The superior of the institution should cooperate with the spokesperson, understand the essence of his/her activity, trust them, give them quite a lot of freedom in coordinating and managing the circulation of information in the institution, and also understand the essence and role of social media in the implementation of the mission of the company or institution.

Many professional skills and competences are required to work as a spokesperson, including but not limited to: information management skills, leadership qualities, strategic planning skills and inquisitiveness, negotiating skills and working under stress and in a fast pace (especially in crisis situations in an exceptional way, but also in everyday media service), knowledge of values and rules of professional ethics,⁹ team management skills, creation and organization of press office work, high level of communication skills (both verbal and non-verbal), ability to build relationships and initiate dialogue, as well as knowledge of communication in new media and use of modern information technologies.¹⁰

PROACTIVE AND REACTIVE COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

The practice of press spokesperson also requires professional communication tools. They can be organized into two departments – proactive, serving the daily work of the press officer and reactive, especially important in difficult and crisis

⁹ S. Gawroński, *Media relations służb mundurowych w Polsce. Analiza wybranych formacji*, Kraków-Rzeszów-Zamość 2011, p. 34.

¹⁰ Y. De La Cierva, *La comunicación en tiempos de crisis*, in: *Ensayos sobre comunicación institucional*, ed. J.M. La Porte, Castel Gandolfo 2003, p. 127.

situations. Modern media monitoring is essential in the daily work of the press officer – not just the press, but also electronic and social media. It is in the latter that information useful for the press officer to capture crisis situations is often published, and it is also used to obtain feedback on published materials. Media monitoring is available not only through a paid service commissioned to a professional press monitoring company¹¹ (payable depending on the number of keywords specified in the service), but also through tools available for free – e.g. Google Alerts. Another important tool in the work of a press spokesperson can be a virtual press office, where after logging in, high quality photos are available for download for publication in the media as well as many other press materials useful for media representatives. These can then result in publications that are more favourable to the institution or company. The advantage of having an online press office is that it is available 24 hours a day, even if it is not possible to contact the press spokesperson for some of the information needed for publication.

New information technologies should be integrated into the whole workflow of the website. A website is an extremely important tool for communication on the Internet, because it is a credible place, signed by the authority of institutions, and there are not many such places on the Net. It is also a cheap communication tool and it is extremely important for many recipients. Professional website in Web 2.0, optimized both in terms of content and technology, and often updated, can be a good tool for search engine positioning/marketing. Such search engine activities not only ensure high position in the natural search results, but also fill the space of the Internet with positive, good messages that inspire confidence. The website of a given institution or company should be managed by a spokesperson, because it is the spokesperson who, as the final instance, is the source of data administration and information flow.

Important proactive communication tools in the work of a press officer include traditional public relations tools, such as: traditional crisis conference, including briefings, sending information materials to journalists, and a virtual press conference using real-time data transmission technology. The latter type of communication is important in the case of non-commercial institutions, which can organize an event at low costs to inform expert journalists about an important issue,

¹¹ K. Gajdka, *Rzecznik prasowy w otoczeniu mediów. Teoria i praktyka*, Kraków 2012, p. 179.

who do not have to leave the editorial office to attend a traditional conference, but can ask questions and hold dialogue on an ongoing basis. In this way, the press spokesperson can also invite bloggers, an important opinion-forming group of Internet users, to the conference, who will be happy to participate in an exclusive conference with interesting guests. However, extremely important communication tools, such as a crisis plan and crisis scenarios, despite the fact that in practice they are used in a crisis situation, should be prepared much earlier and therefore they belong to the proactive tools department. These tools play an extremely important role in the work of the spokesperson as concerns psychological background (when a media crisis breaks out the spokesperson knows what to do, and the answer must be prepared very quickly), but they are also an important determinant of professionalism in this activity. Ready scenarios of conduct (or at least outline of possible solutions) which are practised, thought out in a situation of lack of stress and time pressure, possible variants of solutions, analyzed and written down, a contact book for support services, contacts to important people in the institution, as well as ready press releases and statements, which only need a current date being inserted, are the minimum that each spokesperson should have ready in his/her desk. Most of the possible situations that may happen in an institution can be predicted in advance, and press releases and communications can be prepared before a difficult situation for an institution is published in the media.

The institution's website is a reactive tool in the work of a press officer. It is there, in a difficult situation, that the press spokesperson should publish (as soon as possible) the institution's statement on a given case. The activity of the spokesman will be much more active in this period of time due to numerous media publications and great public interest, therefore making some information available on the website, multiplying it by the stream to social media will be a practical solution for many recipients. A professional spokesperson then monitors internet forums under media publications, is ready for e-mail, telephone, personal contact, and is also active in social media, where there are official websites and channels of the institution and conducts dialogue in a partner-like manner, with respect to persons interested in a given event.

There are some challenges and tasks for the spokesperson (especially in the context of social media, in which crisis situations are growing at a very fast pace and polarisation of opinions takes place within 2-3 hours from the publication of the information), including the organization of the work of the spokesperson and

the respect and observance of the rights of persons for whom this function exists, i.e. different audience groups. Knowledge of copyright laws, providing access to many materials on a “copyleft” basis, without reserving copyright, available for download and use by others, multiplication of messages in many channels of communication, use of the latest technologies in the work of the spokesman, building the highest possible position in the hierarchy of a given institution, participation in the activities and meetings of decision-makers, the fact that the spokesperson is one’s main job, not combined with many other functions in institutions or companies, and the many competences necessary to perform this function and discussed in the paper are certain determinants of the essence of the spokesperson’s function. The challenge in performing this function is not only the growing synergy of off-line and on-line crises, communication differences in traditional and social media, different types of communicators on the Internet, the availability of newer technologies on mobile devices, the generation of crises on the Internet by individual users, the management of critical entries and phenomena (e.g., the use of the Internet as a means of communicating with the public, the availability of new technologies on mobile devices, the management of critical entries and phenomena (e.g., the use of the Internet as a means of communicating with the public). This also includes methods and principles of crisis content management on one’s own website or the basics of crisis web-writing, as well as professionalization of information flow in the institution, both inside and outside it.

It is possible, necessary and worth cooperating with the media, even in difficult situations. Media interest can be used to explain the position of a given institution in a specific case and although it is not a fast or easy process, it is an opportunity to show respect for the recipient, build relations with the media as a competent and prepared person.

Building relationships with journalists is not easy, and it is also important to remember that the style of their work resembles (to put it a bit colloquially) the life of a shark – it must be in constant motion in order to live, and when a little bit of blood appears somewhere – it attacks. However, the goal of working with the media is important – showing true beauty, arousing admiration, reaching out to those in front of monitors and TVs, as well as smartphones.

This concerns in particular the relations with the media world, where information, especially the negative kind, is transmitted at an extremely fast rate, often in the form of unproven news, enjoying the “glory of the news”. Therefore, in view

of this extremely rich and complex reality, it is worthwhile to draw on the achievements of PR and crisis management measures that facilitate the creation of good relations with the media. Especially in the context of the presence of social media, this is even more important, because crisis situations develop in social media at an alarmingly dynamic pace, and sometimes they are actually generated there. Skillful crisis management in social media requires compliance with specific rules and principles, originating from the world of management and practiced there.

It is necessary to take care of the information flow in an institution or a company, and to specify in each unit what is a secret and of what category and rank. Above all, in individual units it is necessary to establish at least the function of a press spokesperson, who will not be burdened with too many additional functions and will have time to perform his/her duties. This is a full-time job. Nowadays, a well-functioning organism cannot do without a person performing the function of contact with the media, who must be prepared to perform his or her function.

In the age of social media and the rapidly increasing number of published information demanding dealing with and, moreover, having in mind the demands facing spokespersons today it is important that they should have their associates and that press teams should be formed. Good relations between the organisation and the media are today the basis for shaping a positive image of the organisation and, moreover, an elementary condition for efficient information management. While the lack of proper relations between them is not very visible during the normal life of individual institutions or companies, crisis situations expose the lack of professional media relations and negatively affect the possibility of resolving the crisis. Crises paralyze the institution communication-wise and prevent its normal functioning. They also polarize the society, affect the image of the whole institution or company and may be a cause of loss of trust among people.

Therefore, professional press offices should be set up, at least of two people, so that if a person designated to communicate with the media is unable to do so, the other person can take over his or her function. Press offices should be established to shape relations with the media and through them – with the environment. The lack of units organized in this way and employing several people in many institutions and companies undoubtedly makes it difficult to have a consistent, professional and transparent information policy, which manifests itself especially in the event of a crisis situation. Registration of legal status, ensuring

the continuity of the existence of such an office by appropriate decrees and human resources, determining the method of submitting substantive and financial reports on this activity to the superior, registering the office's trademarks, the method of conducting accreditation for journalists (various types of agreements with the media) – all these issues require consideration and demand the development of appropriate solutions, taking into account the specific character of work organization in a company or institution. It is also important to ensure adequate resources for running this office, including human and financial resources, etc.

The workload of a spokesperson and press office staff is always increased in crises and difficult situations. The changes taking place in social communication favour continuous dialogue with the environment, stakeholders and Internet users, which generates higher expectations for the institution to conduct a dialogue in social media with each Internet user separately. These changes, including the fragmentation of media and communication spaces, their convergence, as well as the popularization of new ways of communication (communication via mobile devices) and the extraordinary speed of data processing and dissemination of information, all lead to increasing demands on employees of press offices. Therefore, it is important not only to create press teams (even larger than two-person teams, because the spokesperson himself will not be able to cope with this huge amount of work and communication challenges)¹², but also taking care of their efficiency. It is therefore important to introduce a system of teamwork, but also a requirement that the office manager also have managerial skills to manage a team of people in a professional way. Good relations between the organization and the media are today the basis for shaping a positive image of the organization, and what is more, they are an elementary condition for efficient information management. While the lack of proper relations between the company or institution and the media is not very visible during the normal life of individual institutions and companies, crisis situations expose the lack of professional media relations and negatively affect the possibility of resolving the crisis.¹³ Communication crises paralyze the institution and prevent its normal functioning, polarize society, affect the image of the company or institution and may be the cause of serious consequences of various types, including economic ones.

¹² E. Czackowska, *Jak powiedzieć, żeby nie powiedzieć*, „Rzeczpospolita”, 4 VII 2006, p. A5.

¹³ P. Kozyra, *Kryzysowe zarządzanie w Kościele?*, „Więź” nr 2 (2005), p. 58.

Spokespersons are constantly asked to comment on current events and such expectations in today's world come not just from traditional media representatives, but also from internet and social media users. The lack of such organized press offices in many institutions and companies undoubtedly makes it difficult to hold a consistent, professional and transparent information policy.

THE TASKS OF A SPOKESPERSON AND A PUBLIC RELATION SPECIALIST DURING THE CRISIS SITUATION

There are many challenges and tasks for a press officer during a time of destabilization of an organization or company. Some entities and people from the management only then become aware of the need for a person to contact the media, representing an institution or a company. These tasks include rapid selection of an appropriate strategy; moreover, it is important to organise a press conference or any other appropriate form of contact with the interested media as soon as possible (issuing a press release, organising a briefing, etc.); analysing facts and data to control the flow of information in a crisis; establishing a uniform official company position: guaranteeing a single source of information (press office), ensuring communication with the internal environment (so that employees do not learn about a difficult situation in an organisation or institution from the media); anticipating potential accusations (also using previously prepared crisis scenarios); providing access to information for the media with the most up-to-date issues; monitoring deadlines (especially those promised to journalists) and providing feedback; continuous contact with management; avoiding emotional approaches to problems; maintaining trust in the institution, its staff and management; providing authority support; creating a crisis book with all possible crisis situations and scenarios, as well as prepared procedures and document templates (e.g. press releases); announcing corrective actions; availability in contacts with all interested parties. This conceptual work is sometimes divided between a press spokesperson and a public relations specialist, sometimes it is left to the press spokesperson only, and sometimes it is delegated to a press office if it exists. The press office is quite often responsible for: daily updating of the website and administration of the website; moderating discussions in social media profiles (Twitter, Facebook, etc.); creating a database of photographs of board members; creating a so-called crisis book – with all possible crisis situations and scenarios of their solutions, as well

as prepared procedures and document templates (e.g.: press statements); initiating the statements for the media – making them interested in the positive topics, valuable from the point of view of the company or institution; creation of a database of experts together with telephone numbers of people who could provide opinions for the media; daily monitoring of the media; preparation of materials for the website; participation in events important from the point of view of the company or institution; cooperation with local media – establishing a common media strategy once a week; cooperation with the editors of secular press – radio, television, Internet; writing demerits and requests for explanations – responding to criticism and manipulation of media facts.

There are, however, some elements which interfere with the efforts made by the spokesperson and the press office. These include in particular: lack of trust on the part of the employer; lack of internal trust within the institution; lack of a system for managing information within the institution; and lack of classification of that information (e.g. classified information, etc.) and access to it. It is also important to note the lack of coherence of the information provided, the inadequate organisation of staff work; excessive emotions in communication; incomprehensible and non-transparent actions of the staff; financial problems and lack of transparency in the economic aspect of the institution; distant and ineffective actions on the part of staff and managers of the institution; lack of willingness on their part to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions; lack of resources to organise meetings with journalists and lack of resources to prepare professional press materials for them; lack of direct access by the spokesperson to the institution's highest-ranking superior, who is his sole superior.

SUMMARY

Many companies and institutions appointing a spokesperson often do not equip him/her with the most important tools of effective work, do not organize support in the form of a press office or even a person administering social media or a public relations specialist. This leads to the extension of the tasks of the spokesperson, who, in addition to cooperation with the media, must manage relations with other groups of the environment. Social media and websites are groups completely different from journalists, very demanding in communication, because in these spaces there is a continuous dialogue with Internet users. On the

other hand, teamwork, even if the team is composed of only two people, is more efficient (and its effectiveness increases with the number of people employed in the press office). The press office should be responsible for the website of a given unit in terms of content. At least one other person in the press office is needed not only to administer these channels of communication, but also to undertake the obligation to provide information to journalists during the absence of the spokesperson in the office, i.e. holidays, illness, or to be able to go for an interview or visit the studio (answering phones, organizing meetings, etc.). The spokesman and the employee of the press office should not perform any other functions in the company and institution and should combine this work with other workplaces for reasons of ethics, accessibility as well as credibility and trust,¹⁴ which he/she is endowed with as a representative of the company or institution. A spokesperson should be a person who has access to full and complete information. This is necessary in order not to make mistakes in the media, to skilfully manage crisis situations, for which the person must be prepared and not be surprised by them.

A spokesperson should be a person who has access to full and complete information.

The role of the spokesperson in crisis situations cannot be overestimated and often it is up to the spokesperson and his communication skills to manage a crisis situation. With the support and cooperation of a public relations specialist in the field of communication with different groups of the environment, the spokesperson plays a key role in crisis management.

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Biogram

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MEDIA

przedstawiciel Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w zespole roboczym Social Dimension w pracach Bologna Follow-Up Group w ramach Bologna Process. Interesuje się zagadnieniami etyki, społecznej odpowiedzialności biznesu oraz zrównoważonego rozwoju w instytucjach niekomercyjnych, public relations, crisis management i social media.

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