CASE STUDY

Crisis communication failures: The BP Case Study

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Abstract

On the 20th of April 2010, an outstanding explosion of the BP Deepwater Horizon oil rig situated in the Golf of Mexico caused the largest maritime disaster oil spill in the USA history and particularly caused considerable reputation and financial losses to BP.To deal with the spill oil as well as reputation and financial losses, the company particularly use many tactics and tools to communicate with stakeholders during and after the crisis. However, crisis management and communication experts' opinions differed on whether BP crisis communication was effective or ineffective.This paper aims to assess BP crisis communication and mainly to point out possible failures through a content analysis of secondary data collected from various sources (newspapers, magazines, annual reports and blogs).

Keywords: *British Petroleum, Crisis communication, Crisis Management, Deepwater horizon.*

Introduction

On the 20th of April 2010, the petroleum industry has been marked by the largest maritime disaster oil spill in its history known as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. This accident was caused by an outstanding explosion and has resulted in the killing of eleven people. Five months after the explosion and until the announcement of the completion of sealing of the oil well, some 780 million gallons of crude leaked into the sea, causing the most considerable damages in the USA from an oil disaster, not only on the environment, but also on economy and on the regional tourism. The damages produced by this accident were also particularly considerable for BP. The company was facing simultaneously two main issues: the biggest spill oil in the US history and considerable financial and reputation losses.

At the financial level, BP shares loosed on June 25, 2010, nearly 7% and fell to its lowest level since 14 years in the London Stock Exchange. In addition, the BP stock market valuation, which was $182 billion on April 20, dropped to $ 89 billion on July 2, 2010. As for the company's reputation, it has dramatically collapsed not only in the U.S.A. but also worldwide. According to Covalence, an organization that tracks the ethical reputation of multinationals, BP's reputation has fallen sharply as the spill has progressed without a resolution. BP was then awarded the grade E, the lowest grade attributed by Covalence in a ranking used

by ethical investors. In addition, a PR Week/One Poll's survey conducted about one month before the accident showed that the public feels that BP has not done enough to stop the leak. This reputation loss persisted till yet. Almost a year after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the "l2th Annual Harris Interactive U.S. Reputation Quotient (RQ) Survey," (released on May 2 by research group Harris Interactive polled over 30,000 Americans between December 2010-February 2011) revealed that, among the 60 most visible US companies, BP was second from last with a score of 49.82 and concluded that BP was still perceived by Americans as one of the companies with the worst corporate reputation in the USA [1].

Furthermore, BP faced growing calls for boycott of its products. In mid-June 2010, the number of Facebook group called "Boycott BP" grew to almost 640,000 fans. An anonymous activist has joined the fun by establishing a fake BP Twitter account called @BPGlobalPR and started sending out messages about the Gulf oil spill to Twitter. A month after the explosion, @BPGlobalPR had 190,035 followers while the BP account, @BP_America had only 18, 826 followers. At last, BP was facing thousands claims and lawsuits from many actors such as fishers, hotels, restaurants as well as NGOs like the Animal Welfare Institute (AWI) and other animal protection and

conservation organizations. To deal with the spill oil as well as reputation and financial losses, BP mobilized substantial means and expended a great deal of effort. The company particularly started up its communication machine in the hope to reduce and even to repair reputation damages. However, crisis management and communication experts' opinions differed on whether BP has successfully or unsuccessfully communicate with its stakeholders during the crisis. The aim of this paper is to assess BP crisis communication relating to the Deepwater Horizon disaster and mainly to point out failures by using the existing models and theories related to crisis communication. The paper is organized as follow. After this first section dedicated to the background information, we present, in a second section, the theoretical framework, then we analyze and discuss, in a third section, the BP case study results, and finally, we draw conclusions in a fourth section.

Theoretical Framework

Following the multiplication and acceleration of crisis during the last decades, crisis management is viewed nowadays as a critical function for an organization, because failure in managing a crisis can result in serious harm to the stakeholders, losses for an organization, or even end its existence.In particular, researchers have shown an increased interest in crisis communication. Coombs [2] noted that crisis communication become an established corporate discipline in the last twenty years. Falkenheimer and Heide [3] considered it as the core of public relations practice and theory, while others underlined that it has been one of the three main areas of public relations research in the last two decades [4].

Crisis Communication Defined

Crisis is an event that suddenly occurs, demands quick reaction and interferes with organizational performance [5] because it brings, or has the potential for bringing, an organization into disrepute and imperils its future profitability, growth, and possibly its survival [6].Indeed, during crises, people seek to find order in the chaos, in the sens that they seek to make sense of what is happening around them [7] and crisis communication plays a central role in effective crisis management. Crisis communication was defined by many researchers in different ways. According to Gray [8], crisis communication is related to managing the outcome, impact, and public perception of a crisis. Williams and Treadaway [9] defined crisis communication as the organization's response to a crisis situation in an attempt to diminish damage to the corporate

image, while Hale et al. [10] consider that crisis communication can be summarized as a process of information collection, information processing, decision making, and information distribution of data necessary to address a crisis situation to internal and external stakeholders. There is nowadays a broad consensus among theorists and practioners that crisis communication should be considered as an integrated in as well as a critical element of, the overall crisis management process [11] and that effective crisis communication is essential to maintaining a positive relationship with key stakeholders in times of crisis [12].In particular, crisis communication directly affects how the public perceives the organization during and after the crisis [9]. In addition, factors such as globalization, rapid development of new communication and information technologies as well as social media expansion have dramatically changed the way information and communication is transmitted in times of crises. Consequently, risks are nowadays very high during and after a crisis occurs and crisis images, stories and spreading misinformation tend to move faster and faster. Crisis communication plays nowadays a central role in effective crisis management and have then increased in importance in the last decades. It's also noteworthy that, there is at least two conception of crisis communication approaches. Some authors view crisis communication as a reactive function [6] [13], while others regard it as a long-term process and as a proactive function rather than a reactive function [14-17].As proponents of the reactive approach, Sturges et al [12] stated that crisis communication involves the interaction with stakeholders during the "breakout stage of a crisis". Lerbinger [6] also state that the majority of the communication decisions have to be made when the crisis takes place.

In contrast, supporters of a proactive crisis communication approach, argued that organizations will be more prepared to manage and resolve a crisis if effective communication systems are in place before the crisis occurrence and stakeholder relationships and credibility have been built prior to the crisis [15]. Also, Ulmer et al [13] consider that crisis communication is essential to manage the pre-crisis phase and wrote that "effective crisis communication starts long before a crisis hits an organization and should be part of every organization's business and strategic plans". The authors also underline the importance of crisis communication in the post-crisis phase when he wrote that "after a crisis, organizations

should provide information to stakeholders but should also schedule time to listen to their concerns and to answer their questions" Ulmer et al [13]. Lastly, Heath and Millar [16] specifies that proactive crisis communication fulfils two important functions: it should firstly anticipate possible crises and reduces their occurrence probability, and should secondly, prepares key stakeholders for a crisis in order to ensure the crisis will be controlled when it occurs.

Effective Crisis Communication Models

Many crisis communication theorists have suggested theoretical models for an effective crisis communication (eg, Lee, [18]), but the theory of image restoration [19] as well as the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) developed by Coombs and Holladay [20] are by far the most used theories in this field. Lee [17] identifies six major communications strategies that companies can adopt when facing to a crisis. The first strategy called "shifting blame" consists of claiming that others are responsible for the crisis. The second strategy labeled "minimization" is to claim that the consequences of the crisis are not as bad as have been portrated. The third strategy, called "no comment" relates to refusal to comment. The fourth strategy "apology" is made through a verbal apologetic statement. The fifth strategy labeled "compensation" involves giving monetary compensation to victims, and the sixth strategy called "corrective action" promotes actions taken to prevent the reoccurrence of the same problem. The theory of image restoration [18] is built to help managers to preserve an organization positive image through communication. Although it's not initially dedicated to crisis communication, researchers assume that it could be useful in this field because crises generate negative perceptions among stakeholders about the organization which affect its image and reputation. The theory focuses on the content of crisis communication messages and suggest five main image restoration strategies namely Denial, Evade responsibility, Reduce offensiveness, Corrective action and Mortification, with fourteen additional options or tactics. Applied to the crisis management field, the first and the second strategies (Denial and Evade responsibility) are seen as ways to deny or reduce the responsibility of the organization. The third and fourth strategies (Reduce offensiveness and Corrective action) are to be used in order to reduce the perception of damage caused by the crisis. The fifth strategy (Mortification) is to be used to ask forgiveness and expressing remorse. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) initially developed by Coombs and Holladay [19] is also among the most used theories in the crisis

communication field. Noting important variations in crisis, the authors suggested a more refined typology of crisis situations and a "repertoire" of ten crisis-response strategies. Indeed, the authors classified crisis into thirteen crisis types and grouped them into three clusters (the victim, the accidental and the preventable). Each of the crisis type in a cluster shares a similar level of crisis responsibility with the others [19]. These crisis types produce strong attributions of crisis responsibility, and thus, represent a severe reputational threat to an organization. The SCCT also assumes that each crisis generates particular attributions of crisis responsibility, the degree to which the organization is perceived to be responsible for the crisis event [2]. The theory is further concerned with the historic behavior of the organization indicated by the company's performance history formed by both the company's crisis history and its stakeholder's relationship history. The SCCT particularly argues that a negative performance history intensifies the reputational damage of the crisis type and suggested ten (10) crisis response strategies, grouped into three postures[1] namely the "deny posture", the "diminish posture" and the "deal posture" [2]. It's essential to note that both image restoration theory [1] and SCCT [9] adopted predominantly a reactive crisis communication approach.

These theories show what would be done to protect and to repair damaged image and reputation during crisis as well as inthe post-crisis phase. Apart from these models, some scholars and experts have recently suggested lists for crisis communication best practices [21-23].

Covello [11] suggested a checklist of best practices that should be included in any public health risk and crisis communication plan namely, (1) Accept and Involve Stakeholders as Legitimate Partners, (2) Listen to People, (3) Be Truthful, Honest, Frank, and Open, (4) Coordinate, Collaborate, and Partner with Other Credible Sources, (5) Meet the Needs of the Media, (6) Communicate Clearly and with Compassion and (7) Plan Thoroughly and Carefully.

Bernstein [20] suggestes 10 steps to implement crisis communications within the organization, and notes that the first seven steps should be undertaken before crisis occurs. The ten steps are respectively, (1) Identifying the crisis communications team, (2) Identifying the

spokespersons, (3) Spokespersons Training, (4) Establishing notification systems, (5) Identifying and knowing stakeholders, (6) Anticipating crises, (7) Developing holding statements, (8) Assessing the crisis situation (9) Identifying key messages and (10) Riding out the storm. Lastly, and on the basis of the results of a crisis communication experts panel within the context of large publicly-managed crises, Seeger [22] suggests the following ten best practices for effective crisis communication: (1) Process Approaches and Policy Development, (2) Pre-Event Planning, (3) Partnerships with the Public, (4) Listen to the Public's Concerns and Understand the Audience, (5) Honesty, Candor, and Openness, (6) Collaborate and Coordinate with Credible Sources, (7) Meet the Needs of the Media and Remain Accessible, (8) Communicate with Compassion, Concern, and Empathy, (9) Accept Uncertainty and Ambiguity, (10) Messages of Self-Efficacy.

Analysis & Discussion

Because of the subject sensitivity and the fact that BP managers will be particularly reluctant to give out accurate information about some issues such as BP safety procedures and policies, as well as the real objectives of BP crsis communication strategies, secondary data was collected from various sources, specifically newspapers and magazines, BP sustainability annual reports and blogs. It is noteworthy that in order to ensure the validity of the data, we used only trustworthy newspapers and magazines. The collected data was content-analyzed through a grid drawn from our theoretical framework. As we assume, in accordance with the SCCT Theory, that the company's negative performance history intensifies the reputational damage resulting from the crisis and could then affects the crisis management and communication decisions when the crisis occurs, this section will be decomposed into two sub-sections, the first describes the BP crisis history while the second one listed the main failures in the BP crisis communication.

The BP Crisis History

Even prior to the Deepwater horizon disaster, BP was familiar with disasters and scandals and has a long history of safety negligence particularly in the United States. In December 1965, the BP oil rig Sea Gem collapsed while it was being moved and thirteen crew died. On March 23, 2005, BP's Texas City Refinery exploded and caught fire. Fifteen workers have died and more than 170 others have been injured. BP was then subject to lawsuits from the victims' families and was charged with criminal violations of federal environmental laws. One year later, following an oil spill in Alaska, BP

discovered extensive pipeline corrosion and faced serious operational issues. The company also paid about $ 20 million as environmental fines.

Consequently, the group has tried to differentiate itself from its competitors by displaying a greater environmental awareness. In 2000, the group renamed itself "Beyond Petroleum" instead of "British Petroleum" and adopted a new logo featuring the green and yellow sunburst. The group launched an advertising and public relations campaign that reached $ 200 million. Thanks to this campaign, BP brand awareness jumped from 4 per cent in 2000 to 67 per cent in 2007 and the company has been praised by the consumer business press and awards shows as a model of credible corporate social responsibility. In addition, a customer survey conducted in 2007 revealed that among companies operating in the oil sector, BP had by far the most environmentally friendly image. In the same year, the BP campaign won the Gold Award from the American Marketing Association.

BP also tried to positioned itself as a company fighting the climate change by promoting the renewable energy activities (including biofuels, hydrogen, solar and wind power). According to a report analyzing the Climate Change Strategies of the top 100 global companies published by the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies (CERES) on Mars 2006 [6], BP was the leader and had the top score in a ranking of 100 Global Companies. BP was also among pioneer companies that begun to publish an annual sustainability report in order to communicate their sustainability strategy to their stakeholders.

It's also noteworthy that BP was many times cited as the worst or among the worst companies operating in USA in relation to some environmental or social aspects. In 1991, the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) cited BP as the most polluting company in the US based on its toxic release data. Corp Watch listed BP as one of the ten worst corporations of 2000 [24]. Mother Jones Magazine, an investigative journal, named BP as one of the ten worst corporations in both 2001 and 2005 based on its environmental and human rights records. The Texas Public Interest Research Group claimed, in a 2004 analysis, that 3,565 accidents happened in BP's U.S. chemical plants and refineries between the period 1990 and 2004, making the company number one in accidents in the nation. Elder [14] considered that BP's operations in the United States have the worst safety record in the industry.

Last but not least, BP was cited in the press as one of the biggest spenders on lobbying in the oil and gas industry. Between 2004 and 2010, BP has spent a total of $625 million to represent its interests in Washington. In 2009, BP was suspected to use nearly $16 million to lobby US Congress in order to block attempts to regulate stricter safety.

The BP Crisis Communication Failures

In the light of our theoritical framework, seven failures, at least, should be highlighted. The first one concerns the pre-event planning. In fact, the deepwater horizon disaster is a tangible proof that, prior to the crisis, the BP environmental strategy was just a Green washing. Indeed, BP has never embraced a culture of safety, has never envisaged an emergency plan, was not prepared to deal with a such situation and did not make enough efforts to avoid crises. Furthermore, investigations conducted after the accident demonstrated that BP cut corners in days before the accident and neglected serious warnings few days before the accident.

In particular, it is clear that BP has not prepared a crisis communication plan. As a matter of fact, the former BP CEO Tony Hayward recognized in an interview to Money Program on BBC 2 that "BP's contingency plans were inadequate" and that BP "was not prepared" for the Gulf oil disaster and was "making it up day to day" in the early stages. He also said that BP was not prepared to deal with the intense media scrutiny over the Gulf oil disaster and that he felt he was "demonized and vilified".

The second failure is related to expressing concern and empathy to the accident victims as well as other stakeholders.

In fact, although the initial messages made by a company when a crisis occurs should significantly influence public opinion about the crisis as well as the organization's handling of the event [18], BP was neither quick, nor accurate and consistent in responding to the accident; consequently, its initial response and messages generated a lot of harm to its image and reputation.

Indeed, BP was accused of being too slow to acknowledge the problem initially as well as and of did not respond quickly enough. The company took four days to realize that the well itself was leaking. The company was particularly slow to express concern, compassion and full apology to victims which are most immediately affected by the spill.

BP rather tried to blame third parties and abdicated responsibility while it would express concern for the victims and take its responsibility and reassure all the stakeholders.

In the initial response phase, BP should have provided information and should have taken actions that might help affected people to cope psychologically and physically with the crisis [2]. It was better to take its responsibility, to reassure victims and specifically to begin by expressing concern for the victims of the crisis which could reduce the negative effects of the crisis. Focusing on its image to the detriment of victims and stakeholders, was the third BP crisis communication failure.

To repair reputation damages, BP launched immediately after the accident, a vast public relations campaign. The company began running apologetic ads in early June, showing Hayward apologizing for the disaster and taking "full responsibility for cleaning up the spill in the Gulf". BP also launched a print ads campaign in US newspapers like The New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, USA Today and The Washington Post. This ads campaign was widely criticized by many stakeholders and even by the President Barack Obama, who considered that the money should have been spent on clean-up efforts and on compensating victims. More notably, the BP initial crisis communication was largely focused on legal concerns and resulted in denials of responsibility, minimization of the extent of damages and lack of useful information to stakeholders.

The fourth failure relates to Spokesperson identification and preparation. When a crisis occurs, crisis leaders, especially spokesperson, have a central role in building and sustaining organization's trust and credibility among stakeholders [25]. Also, in times of crisis, leaders and therefore spokesperson, must be able to communicate with all stakeholders and should be exceptional communicators [26].

Because of his arrogance, negligence, its famous statements and particularly being not prepared to a crisis, former BP CEO has significantly contributed to BP loss of reputation. Instead of assuming its responsibility and expressing its compassion towards the victims, the BP former CEO Tony Hayward— as the company spokesman, had a series of mistakes during this crisis. He initially downplayed the spill and minimized its severity considering that "its environmental impact would likely be very modest" and that it is

"relatively tiny" in comparison with the big size of the ocean. He also told a news cameraman to "get out of there", complained that he wanted his life back stating to reporter that " There's no one who wants this thing over more than I do, I'd like my life back", and went to watch his yacht race while oil spews into the Gulf. As a consequence, the former BP CEO has become the most hated man in the United States.

As a matter of fact, BP announced on July 27th 2010, that in October 2010, it would change its CEO Tony Hayward by the American Robert Dudley. Some experts had expected that a lot of Americans will be pleased to see an American person replacing the arrogant former CEO and that this would certainly help to restore the BP image.

The fifth failure concerns the company's stakeholders relationship and involvement in crisis management. In fact, prior to the disaster, BP has successfully established strong relations with some NGOs. It seems that the company was well aware that establishing such relations could give it more legitimacy as well as more credibility to its environmental discourse. Also, thanks to such strategy, the group wanted to hedge itself against NGO reaction in the case of accidents. Thanks to some BP giving (nearly $10 million in cash over the years), the Nature Conservancy, listed BP as one of its business partners and gave it a seat on its International Leadership Council. Also, after the Deepwater Horizon accident, some of its members begun to questioning about this partnership and called to review it. By the way, the Conservation International NGO, another BP partner on a number of projects and which accepted $2 million in donations from BP over the years, announced that it was reassigning its ties to the oil company in the wake of the massive Gulf spill.

In addition, once the crisis occurred, BP seemed to prioritize on shareholders and investors. Early July 2010, when the BP stock hit its lowest point since the mid-1990s and 50 percent of BP market capitalization was lost, BPs former CEO flew to Mideast and held talks with sovereign wealth funds in Abu Dhabi, Kuwait and Qatar, as well as in Singapore, in order to find a partner who might help BP to avoid the threat of a hostile takeover offer from its closest competitors. These visits aimed to reassure BP shareholders and investors as well as BP partners in Russia and Azerbaijan which had much concerns after the BP decision of selling assets. Besides, this trip immediately

generated some enthusiasm in the market for BP shares.

Fortunately, the company seems to be more aware that it should collect informations from a wide range of stakeholders, and that it has to continue to work in close dialog with them in order to reduce feeling of anger and blame, to reassure them, to understand how they perceive and feel about it after the crisis as well as to involve them in effort to repair reputation damages. Consequently, BP began through workshops with its influential stakeholders around the world (in London, Washington DC, New Orleans and Rio de Janeiro), to initiate a dialogue to find out what they expect from BP's sustainability reporting [27]. More than 40 stakeholders (including representatives of non-governmental organizations and community groups as well as academics, policymakers and investors) took part in these workshops which aimed to give BP a clear brief about what stakeholders want to know about its culture, plans, policies, processes and performance. The company already included a summary of the workshops findings in its 2011 sustainability report. In addition, BP has used a specialist market intelligence search engine to identify trends in public and stakeholder opinion about BP and to evaluate their potential to affect the company's reputation. A meta-analysis was also provided of all the recent stakeholder's research and dialogue BP had carried out or commissioned.

The sixth failure refers to collaboration with media. Indeed, in times of crisis, a company must not ignore the central role of media because, during a crisis, the majority of the information stakeholders collect about organizations is mainly derived from the news media; therefore media coverage is an important feature of reputation management [28]. Consequently, as stated by Seeger [22], rather than viewing the media as a liability in a crisis situation, risk and crisis communicators should engage the media, through open and honest communication, and use the media as a strategic resource to aid in managing the crisis

In order to control their exposure to the press, BP tried to censure, to limit and/or to delay the flow of informations to the public. Many reporters claimed that BP (with the complicity of the Federal Aviation Administration and the Coast Guard) refused access to planes carrying media. Others reported that the Coast Guard and BP threaten them with arrest for documenting oil spill. Even the reporters that were allowed to see Elmer's Island were accompanied by a BP representative.

BP also included in workers contracts a clause prohibiting them and their deckhands from making "news releases, marketing presentation or any other public statement". The seventh and last failure is related to the company truthfulness and honesty in times of crisis.

It is noteworthy that prior to the crisis, BP had tried to build up an image of legitimacy and trustworthiness, but this does not help it during the disaster, because stakeholders realized that the BP environmental strategy was just a Green washing. Also, during and after the Deepwater Horizon accident, the BP communication lacks of truthfulness and honesty.

In fact, when the crisis occurs, BP has initially underestimated the magnitude of the spill and minimized the oil leak into the Gulf of Mexico. One week after the explosion, BP claimed that only 1,000 barrels were spilling daily but by the end of the week, the company revised it upward to 5,000 barrels. Indeed, some scientists estimated, at the end of June, that 60.000 barrels were actually spewing into the Gulf.

BP was also suspected to truck in sand to cover up the oil. Of course, BP denied the facts and stated that "at no time has clean sand been used to cover or bury oil or oiled sand" and that "Storms that have passed through the area have deposited sand on the beach and eroded it again exposing oil buried by sediments brought in by the weather".

In addition, a few days before killing the well, BP published its own investigations report about the incident. BP said that its engineers, contractor Halliburton and rig operator Transocean share the blame for the "complex and interlinked series of mechanical failures, human judgments, engineering design, operational implementation and team interfaces" that caused the accident. Its former CEO said that there was a "lack of rigor and quality of oversight of contractors", that "a series of complex events, rather than a single mistake or failure" led to the accident and that it would be "surprising if the industry does not look afresh at the relationship with contractors". This BP internal report was widely criticized by experts who considered that it "does nothing more than spread the blame", as well as by BP partners Transocean and Halliburton. Transocean responded by describing the report as "self-serving" while Halliburton said that the BP report contained "substantial "errors.

BP also purchased a number of search terms in order to direct each search queried about the Gulf oil spill to the BP site in order to focus user attention on the company clean-up effort. According to SearchEngineWatch.com, BP spent nearly $l Million a month between Google AdWords and YouTube advertising. BP was also very present in the major social networks like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flicker. Even worse, BP published two manipulated and "photoshopped" photos and presented them to the public as "news" photos from the Gulf oil spill response effort. A few days later, BP officially admitted that members of its staff photoshopped the two photos posted on its Web site, and promised to stop this practice.Lastly, nearly one year after the accident, BP published its first post-disaster sustainability report [29-32]. The report acknowledged that the company was sorry for what happened, promised improvements and described how BP is changing. Unfortunately, the report doesn't say how the disaster happened and how much damage was actually done to the environment, the economy and the people.

Consequently, this report was widely criticized by many experts because they considered that it was just a "greenwashed report". Indeed, the company refused to list any figures from 2010's worst US environmental disaster and argued that "no accurate determination can be made or reported until further information is collected and the analysis, such as the condition of the blowout preventer, is completed" and that "We have not included any emissions from the Deepwater Horizon incident and the response effort due to our reluctance to report data that have such a high degree of uncertainty". In addition, by comparing BP's oil spill levels for 2006, 2008, and 2010, the report showed that 2010 had the lowest spillage of those three years (1.7 million litters, as opposed to 2.2 and 3.4 million in the earlier years).

The company said it couldn't include the Gulf spill, because there has been "no accurate determination" of its size [28]. In conclusion, even after the crisis, BP continues to conceal important information about the real damages of the spill oil, disseminated only information that can contribute to repair its reputation and continues to blame its partners. Moreover, the succession of accidents and scandals indicate that BP has never believed that it could learn from such crisis [29-32].

Conclusion

Four lessons could be learned from the analysis of failures in the Deepwater Horizon crisis communication.At first, this case study shows that as many companies, BP seems to ignore the role of crisis communication, before, during and after the

crisis. Specifically, BP seems to ignore that communication during the first hours of a crisis can have remarkable implications for the company image and brand, that almost 80% of a crisis management consists of communication and that much of a crisis lies not in its reality, but in its perception. Second, and during a crisis, Stakeholders want to feel informed, safe and connected when a crisis occurs, then, open timely and trustworthy reporting, as well as regular dialog and communication with all stakeholders should be insured before, during and after the crisis. The company should particularly be honest about what it knows and does not know, which would give it more credibility. Third, crisis communication should be viewed as a proactive function rather as an only a reactive one. In doing so, crisis communication will help crisis managers to anticipate possible crises, to reduce its occurrence probability, to be more prepared to manage and resolve a crisis when it happens, to

prepare key stakeholders for the crisis and to build the company credibility before the crisis occurs. Fourth, as the proactive crisis communication approach involves proactive interaction with key stakeholders and generates solid trust and credibility, there is a big chance that such an approach will be more effective in post-crisis stage and would help the company to better restore and repair reputational damages. These findings should not hide few limitations of this research including those relating to the exclusive use of secondary data. The use of an experts' panel could have increased our research validity. As for future research, we particularly suggest a further investigation of how crisis communication affects people by controlling the level of their attributions of crisis responsibility as well as the corporate commitment to CSR, its reputation and image. This would provide significant improvements to the existing crisis communication theories such as image restoration and the SCCT.

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