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— CASE STUDY***

## HOW TO COOPERATE EFFICIENTLY WITH THE MEDIA IN SITUATION OF CRISIS — CASE STUDY

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### Abstract

The essence of this paper is to show the differences and the degree of difficulty in standard and crisis communication. Communication that we use every day in cooperation with the media should serve as the basis and contribution to obtaining certain efficiency of information distribution, which will pay off in a crisis situation. Rescuing a dog named Baltic could prove to be a major crisis in the history of the NMFRI. There were many threats and decisions that could be regarded as unfavourable for the Institute — is it allowed and for the sake of what — to threaten health and life of people to save an animal; what would happen if the rescue action failed?

Three mandatory rules for communicating with the media were adopted:

1. Speed — proactive communication 24/24.
2. Transparency —in the full sense of the word.
3. Communicating through the same channels as journalists communicated with the Institute.

Strict adherence to these rules resulted in a fact that, in spite of these difficulties, the communication was actually exemplary.

**Keywords:** communication, media, crisis, Baltic

## Introduction

This paper points to differences between and the degree of difficulty in standard and crisis communication. The crisis situation discussed was totally unpredictable, which makes it extremely interesting.

## Communication with the media

Newspapers, radio and television are standard attributes of everyday life as a source of information and knowledge about the world. At the same time media have a major role in forming opinions. In the case of the National Marine Fisheries Research Institute (NMFRI), standard media communication has the dual function of delivering and publicising the Institute's mission to "advance the capacity of science to provide advice on human activities affecting and affected by marine ecosystems" and promoting the Gdynia Aquarium.

The Marine Fisheries Research Institute promotes its achievements using tools related to information and promotion activities such as publications, conferences, symposia, awards, and medals. With respect to crisis situations connected with fishery, the fundamental task of the Institute is to present its position informed by reliable scientific research without yielding to pressure from fishermen and politicians.

In the case of the Gdynia Aquarium, a modern marine zoological garden which is an integral part of the Institute, communication with the media takes a slightly different form.

The Gdynia Aquarium showcases nearly 2,000 aquatic animals representing about 200 species from all around the world. One of the biggest attractions is the coral reef, the giant octopus, demersal sharks, red piranhas, freshwater stingrays, the world's smallest crocodile - the dwarf crocodile and the world's heaviest snakes — the green anaconda. In 2012 the Gdynia Aquarium was visited by over 330 000 people.

An important objective of the Gdynia Aquarium is to carry out education activity. In 2012 the education events organized by the Aquarium attracted 30 000 children and young people. The Gdynia Aquarium is a public centre with a wide target, interesting for the media due to its special character and the accessible manner of presenting issues concerning marine biology and ecology. Standard communication with the media is realised through:

- Press conferences and press releases, passing full information and data
- Maintaining on-going contacts and good relationship with the media (journalists and radio and TV reporters)
- Caring about good and compatible with the mission objectives image of the Gdynia Aquarium and the Marine Fisheries Research Institute
- Co-operating with the media, an indispensable element from the point of view of effective promotion and, consequently, effective operation of the Institute.

### Crisis — what is it?

The word crisis is derived from the Old Greek *krisis* (κρίσις)<sup>1</sup> which meant a *distinction* or a decision and was related to *krinein* which meant to *examine* or to *decide*. In Greek as in Latin, crisis signifies a decisive moment or a turning point. Crisis can be compared to a climax in the course of disease, but then we should accept the Webster<sup>2</sup> dictionary definition of a crisis as “a turning point for better or worse”. In management however crisis signifies a state in the development of an organization which poses a threat to its basic operations and mission.

A crisis situation puts the stability of an organization in jeopardy (loss of trust). The main purpose in fighting the crisis is to protect an organization’s credibility and good reputation. Crisis is the type of conflict wherein of critical importance is the first stage at which “the casting of roles” takes place (who and in what light will be presented in the media).

This relatively brief time should be used to correctly define sides in the conflict remembering that the media don’t represent any side but serve as an arena on which a conflict unfolds. But the media shouldn’t be ignored as they automatically assign roles to those who are silent and avoid contact.

Potential crisis situations for the NMFRI:

- Loss of technical facilities due to a disaster (the Gdynia Aquarium, the office building of the NMFRI, the research vessel *r/v Baltica*), loss of human life.
- Consumers turning away from the brand (e.g. visitors to the Aquarium).
- Sudden loss of animals in the Aquarium.
- Conflicts in the dialogue concerning fishing policies, resources conservation, ecology.
- Accusations of scientific dishonesty or fraud (fishermen, researchers, authorities, the European Commission).

## But the crisis has a dog's face

### Case study: R/V *Baltica* rescues a dog

On 28 January 2010 at 3.40 pm the crew of the research vessel *Baltica*, owned by the Marine Fisheries Research Institute, rescued a dog drifting on an ice floe some 30 kilometres offshore (in the vicinity of Wisłoujście). *Baltica* was on its way back to Gdynia following a several day-long research voyage, when the crew members spotted a dog drifting on an ice floe. The dog was desperately fighting for his life slipping into the water and scrambling up again. It was totally exhausted. As it turned out later, the dog had spent nearly three days on the ice floe. The captain commanded a rescue action. The crew dropped a pontoon onto the water and lifted the dog aboard the *r/v Baltica*. Mr. Adam Buczyński, a member of the Volunteer Lifeguards Association as well as being an inspector for the Polish Society for the Protection of Animals, was the one who got the dog out of the water and took professional care of it. The dog was dried, warmed and, after some time, fed. The crew kept a watchful eye on him throughout the night.

In the morning, after arriving in the port, the dog was taken to the vet. He was given antibiotics and vitamins and his blood was tested. The dog's health condition was described as unexpectedly good.

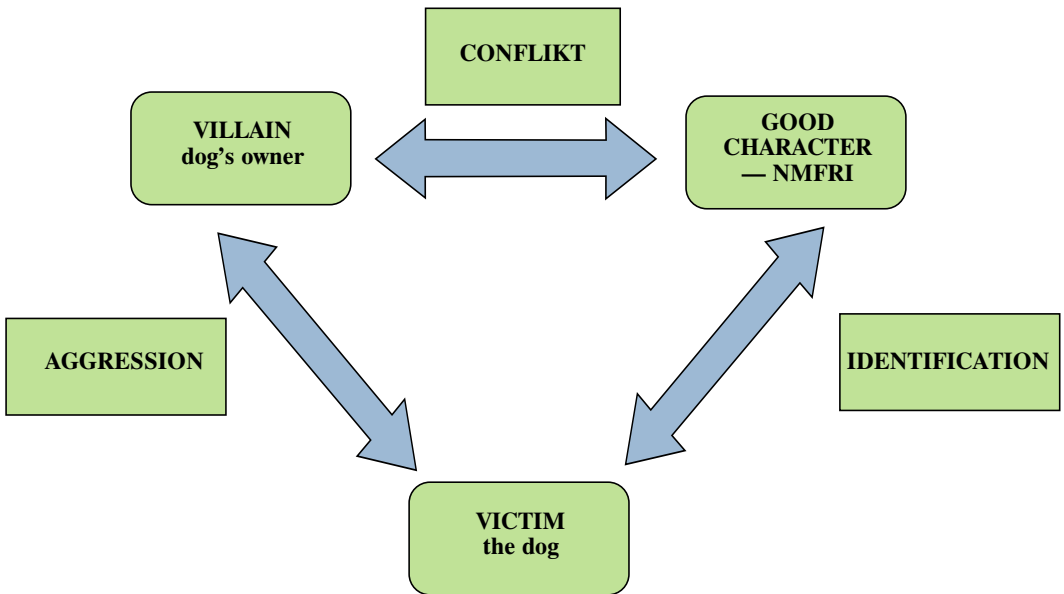
### Ready for the crisis?

The Marine Fisheries Research Institute had been prepared for various forms of crisis. But in this situation there was no contingency plan. The events were unfolding dynamically and the situation was becoming more and more difficult. Typically, of key importance was the first stage of the crisis — the phase when media cast the roles. Let's look at Figure 1.:

In the first phase of the crisis, both the media and the public cast the Institute and its employees — the crew of the *r/v Baltica* — in the role of a good character. Several reasons account for this. An interesting and heartwarming story of a poor deserted little dog (possibly maltreated) and brave "sea wolves" was exactly what the public craved at the time when the media were full of war reports, disasters etc. It is no surprise then that the dog story was instantly picked up by local, national and even international media.

The story had a happy end as on 28 January 2010, after the attempts to find the dog's owner had failed, *Baltic*, as the dog was named, by the decision of the Management of Sea Fisheries Institute in Gdynia, was allowed aboard the ship and became an official crew member.

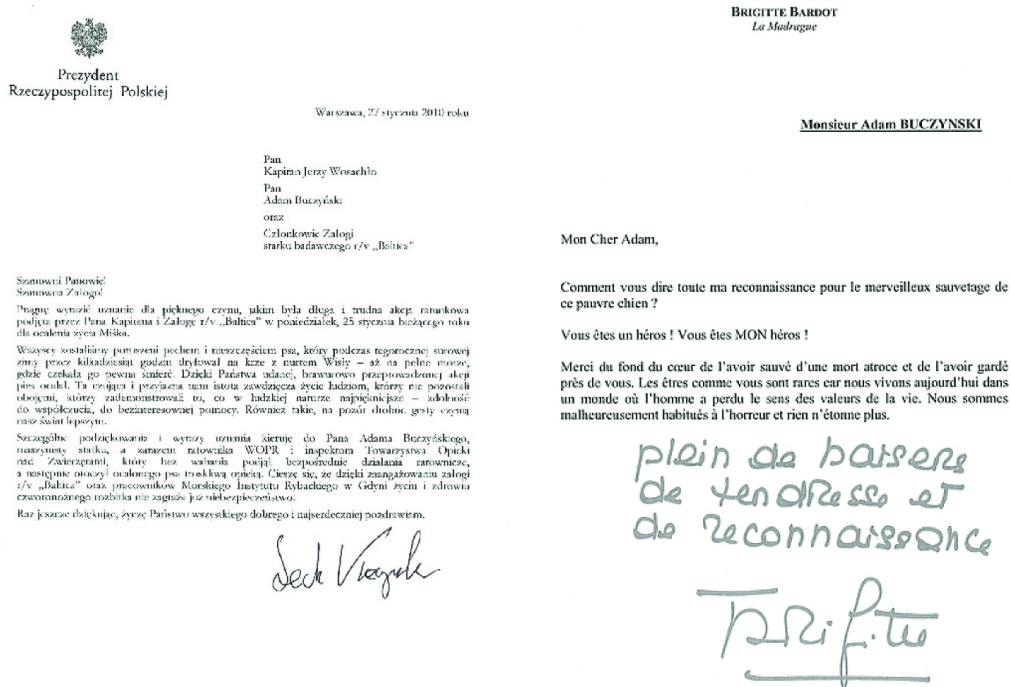
Figure 1. In Shakespeare's footsteps, or a dog as a victim



Source: Developed by the Author based on A. Łaszyn, *Komunikacja kryzysowa [in:] Sztuka public relations. Z doświadczeń polskich praktyków*, Wydawnictwo Związku Firm Public Relations, Warszawa 2011, p. 161.

The dog and its rescuers drew enormous interest. At that time, R/V *Baltica* and the Institute were visited by dozens of media people, all of whom wanted to take a photo of *Baltic* and to be told the full story of its adventure. Also European, Australian and American media — NBC, CNN, *USA Today*, and *National Geographic* — took interest in the story. *Baltic* had its fun clubs and fanpages. At the same time, the dog drew attention of public offices. President of Poland Lech Kaczyński congratulated the crew on good handling of the rescue action. President of the city of Gdynia granted our hero the title of the Honorary Canine Citizen of Gdynia together with the registration number 1000 with the engraved words: "Baltic the Hero". On top of that, *Baltic* became 'the face' of the campaign *A Dog in a Big City* organized by the city of Gdynia. The brave crew received hundreds of letters, post cards and drawings from all over the world, including the emotional thank-you letter from Brigitte Bardot.

Figure 2. Congratulation letters from President of Poland Lech Kaczyński (left) Brigitte Bardot (right).



Source: Author's own materials.

## There were no procedures to rely on but the existing crisis response mechanisms worked well

Standard procedures used in crisis situations to communicate with the media could not be applied in this situation. Crisis management team, identification of crisis trigger points, target audiences in crisis communication, communication channels, crisis procedures, Q&A, holding statements — all these elements did not work in the face of the speed and scale with which the events were unfolding. However, by following certain rules<sup>3</sup>, it was possible to achieve the satisfying communication effects:

1. Swift response — critical first hours — the casting of roles.
2. Acting according to plan — no crisis scenario could be applied.



3. Truth only — don't lie — absolute transparency policy.
4. Say "sorry" — the dog's health condition and social situation, complications — unknown owner.
5. Protection of human life and health — the crew's safety during the rescue action.
6. Compensation of losses — the dog gained a loving family, the R/V *Baltica's* crew.
7. Considering external help — veterinarians, public organizations, authorities (Sanepid, Polish Society for the Protection of Animals, the authorities of the City of Gdynia, etc.).
8. Admitting the mistake — it was a mistake to look for the dog's owner.
9. Open contact with the media — round-the-clock communication (fast and effective: PAP, TVN24, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, RMF FM).
10. Homogenous message — the weak point — each crew member saw and remembered the event differently while they all were willing to talk to the media.

## Facts

- The R/V *Baltica's* crew (employees of the NMFRI) rescued a dog.
- The dog was given medical and psychological care.
- By the decision of the NMFRI the dog was allowed aboard the ship and became an official crew member, gaining home and a family.
- By the decision of the President of the city of Gdynia the dog was granted the title of the Honorary Canine Citizen of Gdynia.
- The Institute became involved in actions to aid animals in need. The Institute gave all food gifts (received in enormous quantities) to the Animal Shelter Ciapkowo, engaged together with the Theatre Miniatura in money collection for animal shelters and became involved in the campaign *A Dog in a Big City*.

## The message sent

- Acting in accordance with the Institute's mission
- Acting according to one's conscience — the captain and the crew
- Baltic — the ambassador of all animals in need
- Baltic — the ambassador of all dogs

## Form of communication

- Pro-active communication
- Effective distribution of information
- Monitoring information distribution channels — effective communication might be threatened by untrue information
- Using all available information distribution channels
- Using information distribution channels as an effective promotion tool with a wide reach

## Unexpected added value

Baltic, as other celebrities, had his biography published. *Baltic. The Dog Who Was Floating on Ice* by Barbara Gawryluk touched the hearts of all those who remembered Baltic's story and brought him even more fans when it became a recommended reading at schools. Teachers interested in this true and heartwarming story began to organize competitions about the book and other actions aimed at propagating the book.

Baltic's fame spread even further with a theatre play following the book. *Baltic. The Dog on an Ice Floe*, a spectacle for children based on Baltic's story, was premiered at the Theatre Miniatura in December 2010. The play is the Polish version of Christmas Carol which tells us to remember about the simplest and most important values like kindness and hope, also in relationships between people and other living creatures. "The most important thing is that it is a true story no one has made up", Romuald Wicz-Pokojski, the play's director, said at a press conference.

The R/V *Baltica*'s crew attended the premiere, becoming the heroes of the night.

## Conclusions

Actually, saving Baltic might have triggered a fully-blown crisis situation seriously threatening the Marine Fisheries Research Institute. During the course of action, there were many threats. The decisions taken might have been perceived in the way harmful for the Institute's image. Was it right and in the sake of what — to risk human life and health to save an animal? What would have happened had the rescue action failed?

In the critical first stage of the crisis situation there were problems concerning the messages sent by individual crew members: the captain, the officer of the watch who first spotted the dog and the officer who actually took the dog out of the water all

perceived the whole situation and their role in it differently. It was hardly possible to control the conflicting messages coming from one source. It was only thanks to huge public sympathy that the contradictory information was accepted by the public with understanding. The following three mandatory rules of communication with the media were strictly observed:

1. Speed — proactive communication 24/24.
2. Full transparency.
3. Using the same channels as those used by the media people to communicate with the Institute.

It was thanks to the strict adherence to these rules that communication with the media was successful, in spite of the hurdles mentioned above.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kryzys>, 15.11.2013

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>, 15.11.2013

<sup>3</sup> A. Łaszyn, *Komunikacja kryzysowa* [in:] *Sztuka public relations. Z doświadczeń polskich praktyków*, Wydawnictwo Związku Firm Public Relations, Warszawa 2011, pp. 161–170.

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