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MEDIA IMAGE CRISIS: A CASE STUDY OF A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

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Abstract: The Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte is the oldest higher education institution in the state and with the largest number of members. Due to the socio-economic impact of the organization, the actions generate constant repercussion in the media, requiring image management strategies to strengthen the reputation, in addition to avoiding or mitigating negative impacts. This way, we developed a case study to investigate the most recurrent types of image crisis, the most affected sectors and the way in which the press reflects negative information. We used as main methodology the content analysis, from the collection of informative journalistic texts, and secondary, the application of a questionnaire between the Federal Institutions of Higher Education (IFES). The research resulted in a diagnosis of the main media image crises.

Keywords: Organizational communication, University education, communication management.

INTRODUCTION

This work is part of the field of Organizational Communication studies and considers the importance of journalistic work and its ability to promote public debate. In a society dominated by the exponential growth of networks and digital devices and by the logic of algorithms, the process of disinformation and fake news is growing. In this sense, journalistic narratives try to oppose this simulacrum of reality from the scope of their practices: verification, verification, sources and testimonies.

This hyperinformation process made possible by the web, digital social networks, mobile devices and *Big Data* provides greater access to events, narratives and discourses by and about organizations. However, this hypervisibility potentiates image crises, since news spreads in infospace and public opinion, heterogeneous and plural, is woven with new actors, in addition to the traditional journalistic media.

Allied to this process of transparency, controversial topics arouse interaction, likes and shares. This poses challenges to public academic institutions that need to quickly combat fake news, rumors and fabricated stories. From the consolidation of social media in the *Internet* (*Twitter*, *Facebook*, *Tiktok*, *Instagram*), the communication management work started to demand even more agility, interaction and segmentation, as the damage progress occurs at the speed of shares, "likes" and "tweets".

According to Han (2018, p. 22), digital media contribute to the construction of instabilities, seeing that internet users start to react with indignation to events, but in an inconstant and ephemeral way, that is, they do not deepen the discussions at the political and social levels, plunging us into a "society of scandal".

Given this context, the institution must prepare itself for negative repercussions, at which time the image can both suffer irreversible damage and can also be an opportunity to reverse the situation bringing gains. According to Ramalho (2010), the management of critical situations must follow the premises of propagation speed, communication transparency, maximum monitoring effort and the attempt to solve the problem within the first 24 hours.

When talking about organizational image management, planning preventive actions for possible problems is essential, as these initiatives avoid or minimize the impacts of negative repercussions. According to Forni (2020), as "no company, no matter how solid, admired and modern, is immune to image crises" it is necessary to create strategies to face such situations.

In addition, an organization's credibility

is its greatest asset and it takes time to consolidate it. On the other hand, for the name of a company to be harmed, it is enough for a negative fact to reach the domain of public opinion, amplified today by the "dictatorship of transparency" (HAN, 2017). In general, it is possible to create prevention strategies and planning mechanisms for delicate situations, as well as assessments after negative events.

It is, therefore, under the aegis of a "transparency society" (HAN, 2017) and "scandal" (HAN, 2018) that we reflect on the communication processes in a public teaching organization. From these initial considerations, the research starts from the following problem: how did the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN) manage its image crises during the period studied? Other important questions: how is the organization's image built in the press? What are the mistakes and gaps in the communication management process?

Based on the Institutional Development Plan 2021-2029 (PDI-UFRN), the university was chosen for being the oldest in the state, founded on June 25, 1958, and for having a large number of members, such as students, professors, technical-administrative and outsourced employees, in addition to having five campuses in the municipalities of Natal, Caicó, Santa Cruz, Currais Novos and Macaíba. Also according to the UFRN Portal, the institution has 3,203 technicians, 2,334 professors, 43,001 enrolled students, in addition to 1,469 outsourced employees, according to information passed on by the Dean of Administration on December 8, 2020. This way, it generates socioeconomic impact and, consequently, repercussions in traditional and emerging media, requiring visibility management strategies to strengthen good reputation, in addition to avoiding or mitigating the negative impact.

The general objective of this article is to diagnose the main types of media crises faced by UFRN, through the analysis of how the press affects informative journalistic texts (materials) of a negative nature.

In this perspective, we carried out a content analysis, based on the collection of journalistic materials about UFRN published in the potiguar press, in online vehicles: *Tribuna do Norte*, *G1 – Rio Grande do Norte* and *Portal no Ar*, from 2010 to 2014. The choice of sites was made considering the main news portals of the state of the period and by observing that digital vehicles have a faster sharing power than print media, allowing for an increase in the reach of negative texts. We observed some aspects in the texts, such as the theme, the presence of photography, the mentioned university sector, the journalistic genre of the text and whether there was the official version of the organization.

In addition, in order to know the national reality of the Federal Institutions of Higher Education, we also sent an online questionnaire to the Universities' Communication Offices, whose answers brought qualitative content to the study on the types of critical situations most faced nationally, the way in which problems are managed and management measures adopted.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Identity and image are distinct and complementary concepts, according to Torquato (2004, p.104), since the first term concerns the "sum of fundamental physical characteristics of the product". Image is the "public projection of the product's identity", that is, it is the way a brand is perceived, involving values and symbolism, in addition to being more subject to positive or negative changes.

It is necessary to understand that a good image is formed from an identity, "[...] that is, before worrying about the image, they must

pay attention to the discourse, the essence, the content. The image is a consequence, a result" (TORQUATO, 2004, p. 119). According to the author, it is innocuous to convey an image that is not real, because, sooner or later, public opinion will discover the deception and this ends up eroding credibility. This way, we found that both image and identity are important for the formation of a good organizational reputation, because more than appearing, it is important to really be. Baldissera (2017, p. 84) corroborates the thought by saying that "it is not enough to propose images of oneself, it is necessary to have coherence between them and the organizational identity (especially in medium and long-term situations)".

Starting with the meaning of the word "crisis", we consider these situations as difficult moments, when there are complications in the company, be they people, economic or property management. Thus, it constitutes "a major event with a potentially negative result that affects an organization, company or industry, as well as publics, products, services, image or reputation" (COOMBS, 2014, p. 19).

According to Roberto de Castro Neves (2000, p. 15), "crises can be generated by process failures, human errors, accidents or other reasons". Mafei (2008) considers the list of critical situations to be extensive and lists some possibilities: accidents with damage to people; corruption, financial or family scandals; merger or acquisition of companies; become the target of investigations; quality failures; accusations of a personal nature (bribery, sexual harassment, etc.); defamatory attack by competitors, among others.

For Thompson (2009), gaffes, explosive attacks, leaks and scandals are examples of triggering elements of media image crises. The gaffe occurs when personalities let slip negative bodily behaviors, such as tasting food in front of cameras, making inappropriate or grotesque gestures. Attacks happen at times of

loss of control, leading to physical or verbal violence. Leaks are intentional disclosures of information, such as audio from chat apps, wiretapping, or publication of sensitive documents. Scandals are based on secrecy, in addition to broken rules or norms, such as extramarital affairs or traffic violations.

There is yet another type of reputation groove, one that is not based on events, but on factoids or untruths and which, however, can cause as much damage to a reputation as a true fact, as is the case with fake news. According to Moreira (2020, p. 395), "ignoring the risks that such (false) news pose to the institution's objectives is to reduce the chances of success and make room for the imponderable".

At these times, image management is essential to eliminate rumors, as it is in these circumstances that informal agents work to propagate untrue information. In addition to trying to reverse the situation with traditional media, it is necessary to make use of the organization's social networks to explain what is happening, making it possible to share the correct news quickly (CRUZ, 2015). These actors contribute to the shaping of public opinion or "public opinions" (CHARAUDEAU, 2016), always in dispute, in a heterogeneity of narratives, as Pozobon and Kegler (2020, p. 51) attest:

> There are, therefore, other modes of enunciation, of interaction and of reading, even for the news, subordinated to the commodified communicational logic that is intrinsic to its architecture and that are conditions of visibility and, consequently, of the constitution of the debate and the formation of opinion. public.

For the internal environment, Torquato (2004, p. 61) mentions the creation of the "network of secretaries", that is, the holding of meetings where the official version is transmitted to be passed on in an adequate and concise way to the organizational community and the " network of informal leaders" - group

of well-connected individuals in the group who can pass on official information with credibility and power of influence.

It is possible to infer from the literature that, before the crisis happens, it is essential to build a good relationship with the press. This is based, according to Mafei (2008), on the awareness of mutual dependence, transparency, truth, quick response to journalists' demands and respect. With a relationship built in advance, the management process will be easier. If, at the time before the problem, the organization used to receive journalists, the posture must continue, as it could calm the repercussion and even reverse the negative impact. "With the media, a transparent, safe and ethical relationship can even alleviate the problem, because a well-managed crisis can result in image and market gains for the company" (FORNI, 2020, p.5).

During these negative events, Torquato (2004) criticizes the posture of "shrinking" or withholding information from the internal community and the external public because it can cause uncertainties, doubts and expectations. The author advocates an attitude of agility in clarifying the situation, understanding and cordiality, reducing the impacts on the company.

According to Coombs (2015), disclosing the official version of the organization is a way to avoid information vacuums and, this way, the emergence of false stories, especially through the sharing of instant messages in applications that viralize rumors and misinformation.

On the other hand, when the institution does not have a good track record with the press or public opinion, communication management becomes difficult, since "not having credibility means, among other things, harming its own performance and compromising productivity" (NEVES, 2000, p. 4). Furthermore, the relationship with the press will start from scratch, precisely at a time when a good history of partnership with the press makes all the difference.

In the context of fake news, it is also necessary to carefully assess whether the repercussion of a negative fact is focused on the public interest or on the propagation of "falsified" narratives. In the latter case, the organization's communication needs to analyze the extent to which disinformation must be responded to. In some cases, the vehicle may not be committed to the truth, only the interest in increasing the number of hits to websites/portals/blogs or making the story go on for more days, putting the organization in a spiral of untruths. As Silva and Baldissera (2019, p. 18) defend, in scenarios marked by spectacularization, it is "likely that organizations will, in due course, trigger a set of strategies aimed at something like a 'leave the scene', with the aim of reducing visibility".

The communication work must be constant, spreading the positive facts, creating ties with the press, admitting failures and seeing these actions as an investment that will bear fruit in the future, with long-term results.

Faced with this need for planning, "nowadays, it is common for large organizations to have a contingency plan in advance, ready to be activated in crisis situations" (MAFEI, 2008, p.9), which can be done through the elaboration of a manual, a plan or the organization of strategies for image management. For Mafei (2008, p.10) the manuals are like an "emergency action roadmap" that must be implemented almost automatically, because in times of need it is necessary to "take measures that do not paralyze the institution and that help decisions to flow better, getting the advisor out of the crisis as soon as possible".

Strategic communication planning has its main function to avoid and, if any negative event happens, to be prepared to take the most

appropriate measures in each context.

Organizations that do not plan for negative repercussions in the press or digital media will find it more difficult to manage critical situations, as they will have to look for solutions in the midst of chaos. In Garcia's opinion (2004, p. 24), organizations that do not prepare themselves for the moment of difficulty can have tragic consequences, "since when you are experiencing a crisis it is impossible to look at the situation with neutrality and manage to remain cool in this situation". context".

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We started the empirical study in an exploratory way, investigating the most common types of events sensitive to reputation, the most affected sectors and the way in which the press reflects negative information about the university, through clipping, whose main objective "[…] is show how the company was highlighted by the media. If the news is good, in favor or if it is critical", to monitor and evaluate UFRN's exposure (ABDALLA, 2002, p. 181).

For this, we use "content analysis" from Bardin (2011), a methodological technique that can be applied in different discourses and consolidated in the field of communication. According to the researcher, the method consists of:

> a set of communication analysis techniques aimed at obtaining, through systematic and objective procedures for describing the content of messages, indicators (quantitative or not) that allow the inference of knowledge related to the conditions of production/reception (inferred variables) of these messages (BARDIN, 2011, p. 47).

The content of the articles published in the press about the university was categorized as "positive" or "negative". For this, we reformulate the concept of Roman (2009) who classifies the press discourse in "well-spoken" or "damn", respectively. The first type focuses on institutional utterances produced in a planned and authorized manner, whereas the second type is propagated in a non-institutional or "clandestine" way, with the ability to spread very quickly, this category includes rumors and fake news.

From a temporal point of view, we delimited the content analysis to the years 2010 to 2014[1], in three online communication vehicles in Rio Grande do Norte, which are: ''*Tribuna do Norte*", because it also has a printed version, *G1 – Rio Grande do Norte*, for being part of a television network, and the ''*Portal no Ar*", that was only present on the Internet. The choice to search in digital media was due to the ease of access to the archived content, given that the search for texts was made in the search engine of each site with the acronym "UFRN".

Informative journalistic texts collected (positive and negative)	1.439
"Negative" texts from: *Tribuna do Norte*	114
"Negative" texts from: *Portal No Ar*	24
"Negative" texts from the *G1 RN*	18

Table 1 – Content collected in newspapers.

Source: Authors (2021).

We found 1,896 texts about the University in the period studied. The final sample is composed of 151 texts, with negative or "damn" orientation. After this selection, following the methodological guidelines of Bardin (2011), we carried out a "floating reading", in order to obtain the first impressions. Then, we chose to analyze the news and consider the visual elements, such as images and illustrations, in the construction of the attributed meaning.

In the negative texts, the theme, the presence of photography, the mentioned university sector, the journalistic genre

1. This research integrates a larger scope that intends to analyze the alterations of the UFRN images in the last ten years.

were recorded, as well as whether there was the official version of the organization. The investigation was carried out with the purpose of tracing an overview of the issues that most provoked negative agendas about the: Potiguar educational institution. Consequently, it became possible to explore which themes are recurrent, being able to create previous strategies or see possible solutions for unexpected events.

As we understand that photojournalism aims to inform, contextualize, offer knowledge, clarify or mark points of view, in addition to the fact that photography works as an attractive factor by drawing more attention to the reader and facilitating the illustration of content, we registered the presence of images in the materials (SOUSA, 2020).

Another aspect observed was the presence of the official version of UFRN in the publications, although the absence does not always mean that there was no response, as the reporter may not have contacted the institution. In any case, having the organizational discourse is important, since it is an opportunity for the organization to report the fact from its perspective or propose a solution to the problem.

In order to analyze the degree of depth of the texts, we classified the articles in note, which is a "short news" (FOLHA DE S.PAULO); "news – brief, summary, not very durable, tied to the emergence of the event that generated it" (LAGE, 2005, p.114); interview, "article published with information collected", with the aim of collecting interpretations and reconstructing facts (LAGE, 2005, p. 73); and reportage, which addresses issues based on events, exploring their implications and raising antecedents (LAGE, 2005) - the latter textual typologies being used as tools for greater contextualization, consultation of more sources, illustrations or details of published facts.

In order to contextualize the research nationally, we sought to identify how federal universities in Brazil usually manage their image crises, outlining an overview of the situation of organizations on the most recurrent cases, the strategies used to reverse the negative repercussions and whether those responsible for the communication sectors considered it necessary to have a media image management plan or manual.

Then, an online questionnaire was prepared with four questions, sent to 56 Federal Institutions of Higher Education in Brazil in 2015, we obtained feedback from only seven universities: Federal University of Alfenas - Minas Gerais (Unifal-MG), Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UniRio), University of Brasília (UNB), Federal University of Cariri (UFCA), Federal University of São Paulo (Unifesp), University of the International Integration of Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (Unilab), Federal University of Alagoas (phew). UFRN, the focus of this study, did not send the answers to the questionnaire.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

From this study, between positive and negative journalistic articles, we recorded a total of 1,896 texts, of which 156 were negative, which represents only 8.22%. Despite the small number of negative publications in relation to the total, image management works with the prevention and mitigation of negative impacts, that is, everything that resonates in the press may gain greater proportions in the future. In addition, an organization's reputation is formed over the years and having its credibility eroded generates damage that can become irreversible.

Among the negative publications, 85 contained a photograph (54.48%) and 75 presented an official version of UFRN

(48.07%). About the textual genre, we diagnosed 94 news, 49 reports, 11 notes and two interviews, which gives us an indication that the press usually publishes larger texts about negative facts about the institution.

The five themes most reflected in the negative articles were strikes and protests by technicians; student demonstrations; care problems in university hospitals; recommendations from control or judicial bodies; and violence (burglary, assault and grooming of minors). The first two types are seasonal events, which were recorded annually and occurred in a similar way, that is, it is possible for UFRN to plan responses and actions to mitigate the negative impact, in addition to being open to dialogue with the groups involved. We observed that a good part of the news about the strike was signed by Sintest, that is, texts coming from its press office of that union.

Regarding the subjects of the recommendations of the control bodies (Comptroller General of the Union, the Federal Court of Accounts and the Public Ministry) or the Federal Justice, we noticed that they were also texts from the press offices of these institutions, without the university version and, often with a punitive connotation. Which denotes the disputes of narratives by the different institutions around the heterogeneous public opinion.

Other themes present in the collection were the problems caused by institutional partnerships, such as the Brain Campus of Macaíba (UFRN and the International Institute of Neurosciences of Natal Edmond and Lily Safra), due to delays in the works and disagreement between scientists; the university's adhesion to the Brazilian Hospital Services Company (Ebserh); noncompliance with the agreement between UFRN and the Natal City Hall and adherence to the federal program Mais Médicos.

Management decisions that provoked disapproval on the part of the university community were also passed on, such as, for example, the use of the National High School Exam (Enem) score or the inclusion argument for admission to UFRN; disagreement about the construction of the Information Technology Development Park between managers of the academy and the prohibition of street vendors on the Campus.

Issues involving university members also generated negative publications with a smaller number of publications, such as disappearance, kidnapping and death of a student or professor; protest by members of the medical residency about salary or working conditions and student misconduct.

In relation to the mentioned sectors, we observe the Rectory; Classroom 2; Center for Human Sciences, Letters and Arts; Department of Arts and University Hospitals. Although they are not units of the university, in the data tabulation we also consider the State Union of Workers in Higher Education Education (Sintest), the UFRN Teachers Association (Adurn), Banco do Brasil (located in the Centro de Convivência do Campus Central, in Natal-RN) and the Brazilian Hospital Services Management Company (Ebserh).

Another work front of the research was about the reality of other universities, to which we applied a questionnaire, whose feedback came from organizations in the Southeast, Midwest and Northeast of the country. Unanimously, the responses pointed to the need for material that helps in communicational planning, citing the following reasons: need for "counseling" before, during and after the crisis; to serve as a parameter and to facilitate the understanding of the actions to those who are not in the communication area; in order to provide transparency, effectiveness and ethics in crisis management; in order to guide

communication management strategies; avoid improvisations, lack of preparation and wrong decisions; and with the objective of acting strategically, anticipating problems.

Although there is a perception of the importance of a manual, none of the universities declared that they use some material that supports communication actions in critical periods, only the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro reported that it is preparing a manual on the subject.

Another question investigated was about the main types of negative events to the image and reputation that universities usually face. According to the answers, the most recurrent problems involve infrastructure issues, lack of security, student demonstrations, server strikes, attendance at university hospitals, etc.

It was also possible to verify that there is no planning to manage critical situations and the work usually occurs in an improvised way. When the problem arises, university management calls on the communication sector to help disseminate the official version. Only the Federal University of São Paulo reported having an outsourced company for cases of image crises.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Reputation has been built up over the years, but it can be damaged at any time, as long as negative repercussions in the press reach public opinion. We believe that no organization is free from image damage. This way, the university's central management and the communication sector must develop strategies and procedures to prevent possible repercussions that may bring problems to the organizational image.

Over the years and the evolution of information technology, which allows for quick publication on news sites and instant sharing of content on social networks,

visibility management cannot be based on improvised actions.

Today, managing visibility requires planned actions of strategic potential. It is necessary to act consciously, knowing what consequences each attitude can cause. The time to prepare for the image crisis is before the critical event happens, because when chaos sets in, it is more difficult to circumvent the damage to internal and external audiences.

As negative situations feed daily the media's agenda, we analyzed how the press reflects on UFRN events, collecting informative journalistic texts from state news portals, which allowed us to have access to themes, sectors and the way they are published. negative texts about the educational institution.

The material collected showed that the most recurrent themes relate to strikes and protests by administrative technicians, student demonstrations, problems related to service or administrative decisions of university hospitals, judicial recommendations or from control bodies and about episodes of violence or criminality.

The most cited sectors were university hospitals, Sintest[2], Rectory, classes sectors (mainly sector 2), Department of Arts, Infrastructure Superintendence and the Permanent Nucleus of Contests.

Among the negative publications, the presence of photography was found in 54.48% and the official version of UFRN in 48.07%. About the textual genre, we diagnosed 94 news, 49 reports, 11 notes and two interviews.

With the objective of comparing and having an overview of the local and national reality, we applied a questionnaire that brought as answers the most common types of negative repercussions faced by other

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2. Despite the union not being directly linked to the central administration of the university, it entered the general statistics, as it is related to the university's technical servers.

Brazilian universities, the way problems are managed and the importance of establishing procedures to deal with them. with critical situations.

From this stage of the study, we discovered the themes that most generated negative publications for federal universities: infrastructure problems, lack of security, student demonstrations, strikes and hospitals. The subjects are similar to the texts collected about UFRN, serving as an indication that there is similarity between the national and potiguar scenarios.

Another point in common with the university is that no educational institution reported having a structured media image management plan. In addition, in the answers to the questionnaire, the communication sectors reported some concerns and needs of professionals caused by the lack of material that helps in communication planning.

Our observations of professional practice at UFRN corroborate the opinion of communication managers, work is usually done in an improvised way, without planning and as demands arise. For these reasons, the answers to the questionnaire also claimed the need to create well-defined strategies for the moments before, during and after the crisis, to facilitate the understanding of actions for those who are not in the area of communication; allow a greater scope of transparency, effectiveness and ethics in management; and to avoid surprises, lack of preparation or making wrong decisions.

We also complement these justifications, remembering that the professional work of managing visibility in a public body is based on ethical principles such as maintaining the truth through the transparency of facts; respect for the public good, since above those involved in possible scandals is the institution; and the social commitment to offer a quality service, with efficiency (costs), effectiveness (results) and effectiveness (impact), premises of the public service.

It is necessary to prepare the institution for difficult times, taking care of the various "stakeholders" of the company, which are the press, society, public and private companies, civil servants (technical-administrative and teaching staff) and outsourced employees. These last two, often overlooked, but of fundamental importance, as they represent the off-campus organization and act as opinion leaders.

We consider as limitations of the research that the collection was carried out only in online vehicles, since it was not possible to analyze the repercussions of printed newspapers, television and publications on social networks, which would allow us to have a more complete picture. Therefore, we believe that further research with other communication vehicles could confirm or bring more detailed results on the repercussion of negative news.

Finally, we believe that the results of this study provide important information about how UFRN has been published in the potiguar press and how the organization reacts to negative publications.

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