Teaching crisis management in Arab universities: A critical assessment

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A R T I C L E I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This research looks at the teaching of crisis management at the colleges and departments of communication and public relations in the Arab world. Major findings of the study suggest that out of 24 colleges and departments of communication and public relations surveyed by this research, only two universities teach the course crisis management in their curriculum. The latest developments in the Arab world dictate new mechanisms in managing information and news and dealing with publics and the mass media locally and internationally. The new trends of teaching crisis management focus on the multidisciplinary approach which consists of a good knowledge of news management, dealing with the media, dealing with people, business administration, information technology, social and anthropological context. All these fields of knowledge are indispensable for understanding the general background of the issues and for choosing and selecting the best communication and persuasion techniques and tactics to manage crises effectively and successfully.

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1. Introduction

The latest protests, uprisings and revolutions in some Arab countries showed the weaknesses of plans, media and communication strategies and tactics dealing with the management of these crises. Countries that were surprised with these crises such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria did not have clear plans and strategies to tackle the crisis and manage it efficiently and professionally. The political leadership of these countries delivered a score of irrelevant speeches badly studied and organized and not matching at all, the demands and needs of the crowds and masses who asked for political, economic and social changes.

The poor handling of these crises by several Arab states shows the lack of crisis management culture in the Arab world. This is due mainly to the nature of the political structure and its philosophy of governance and management which rejects any participation from the masses in political activities. Decisions and plans adopted by governments are not subjected to criticism even if they fail. The media systems in these countries are also under the control of the state and the rulers who cannot be criticized no matter what. The lack of accountability, the absence of values of rational governance, the manipulation of public opinion, the absence of freedom of expression and opinion were strong obstacles and hurdles for the development of policies and crisis management strategies.

Coombs (2001a, 2001b) argues that the organization must have a department of public relations with a history and experience in crisis management; mainly because any organization is subjected to internal and external crisis any time.

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2. The problem

The study of the relationship between crisis management and University programs and curriculum in the Arab world leads us to question the assessment and evaluation process of such programs in public relations in general, and crisis management in particular, and the relationship of such programs with the education and training of professionals who are supposed to have the qualifications and the cognitive and theoretical background and the practical skills in crisis management. The main problem of this study consists of looking closely at the peculiarity of teaching crisis management in the programs and curriculums of colleges and departments of mass communication and public relations in the Arab world and their compatibility with the needs and requirements of the job market. Are the graduates of such departments and colleges qualified and prepared to deal and manage crises? Or the curriculum fails to fulfill such a task.

3. Importance and objectives of the study

The importance of this study lies in the scarcity of Arab research on teaching crisis management in Arab universities, as well as the need of colleges and departments of mass media and public relations to focus and concentrate on such subject. The topic is also worth studying to explain the relationship between training and educating practitioners in the field of public relations, and the needs of organizations for qualified graduates in crisis management. The paper tends to reach the following objectives: assessing crisis management courses in Arab universities; laying down the theoretical, methodological and practical framework required for a good education and training in crisis management. The study tends also to discover the principles and peculiarities of crisis management courses and curriculum.

4. Teaching crisis management

There is no single unified model for teaching crisis management that can be generalized to all the colleges and departments of mass communication and public relations in the Arab world, mainly because the nature of this subject or discipline requires the customization and adaptation to the job market and the needs of various organizations. To present a specialized model for crisis management education and training that can be useful to set a program to teach crisis management in Arab universities, three western specialized institutions were used: The International Observatory of Crises (France), Canadian Institute of Crises (Canada) and University of Maryland Department of Public Relations (USA).

To assure a good education, training and qualifications for students of crisis management, a set of academic components representing the theoretical, cognitive and methodological aspects of education and training in crisis management should be implemented. These are the components.

4.1. Theoretical component

Theoretical education and training in crisis management is based on various concepts, knowledge, and theories related to crises and how to manage them in terms of defining their kinds, their nature and how to deal with them, and their relations with building up the image of the organization (Heiderich, 2011).

Jin (2009) argues that the process of managing crises requires some basic knowledge in psychology, mainly because managing some crises needs great extent of controlling emotions and sentiments, self control, patience, calmness and keeping away from anxiety and carelessness. These attitudes and behaviors are essentials for managing a crisis efficiently, professionally, and with a lot of conciseness, preciseness, and without tempered reactions that can affect negatively rational and successful decisions. Theoretical education and training consists also of some knowledge related to the social, political and economic reality of the society, as well as, the nature of the laws, regulations and jurisprudence of the country. This is due to the complexity of the process of managing a crisis that needs quick and decisive decisions and emergency management planning, and execution (Heath, Lee, & Ni, 2009).

Theoretical education and training in crisis management also requires the teaching of ethics and laws regulating the practice of managing crises, as well as, communication and advertising. Those in charge of managing crises should have a good knowledge of the nature of local laws and regulations related to libel, defamation, disinformation, copyrights.

4.2. Planning component

There is strong evidence that the casual crisis approach from management is changing, and that organization leaders are beginning to place more emphasis on reputation management and crisis planning (Schoenberg, 2005).

Education and training in crisis management requires a good grasp of the various parts of planning and its relations to organizational, technical, material and human resources management (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006, p. 327). The following models can be used for teaching planning crisis management: comprehensive crisis management plan, Open communication system model and Defense advanced research projects agency.

Schenkler and Herrling (2004, p. 88) argue that teaching planning in crisis management should focus on elements related to the management of information and news to be provided to the news media and the concerned publics. This section