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Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal...

High-level crisis situations in tertiary institutions – the media approach

KEY WORDS

scientist, university, crisis, values, post-truth, image

ABSTRACT

The crisis affecting universities and other tertiary institutions has sources that are characteristic for educational institutions. This article aims to discuss ways of the media have of presenting crisis situations that involve the highest level of risk at selected universities and tertiary institutions, situations in which human life is threatened and when corruption and deceit are involved. In the cases chosen for analysis, the deaths of students during hazing at the University of Science and Technology in Bydgoszcz and grant wangling at both Wrocław and AGH Universities of Science and Technology, the authors employ the symbolism of the Ten Commandments, with reference to two of the commandments – thou shalt not kill and thou shalt not steal. The interpretative context is the concept of post-truth.

The crisis is inscribed in functioning of all organisations, including universities. This article aims to discuss ways of the media have of presenting crisis situations that involve the highest level of risk¹, when human life and health is threatened and when corruption and deceit are involved. The authors conducted analysis using the symbols referring to the Ten Commandments in relation to the two commandments: *thou shalt not kill* and *thou shalt not*

¹ The authors, in making such a distinction, used the definition of risk perceived as the uncertainty associated with future events or decisions and their effects. Thus, crisis situation that involves the highest level of risk is an event where the assessment of adverse effects of risk is not acceptable to the university and entails the highest damages to the image. Referring to the existing literature divisions, due to the risk of the consequences on the personal risk and material risk, it was classified to crisis situations that involve the highest level of risk related to danger to health/life and crisis situations that involve the highest level of risk related to embezzlement of public funds, financial frauds, wangling.

steal. The study involved examples that have not been widely discussed before, but have a wide media resonance: death of students during hazing at the University of Technology and Life Sciences in Bydgoszcz and grants wangling at two universities with strong image that are highly rated in rankings – Wrocław University of Science and Technology and the AGH University of Science and Technology. Quantitative research on frequency of specific words, their collocations, analysis of more than a thousand of articles from internet portals and press, made it possible to identify various ways in which the media present crisis at Polish universities. The interpretative context is the concept of *post-truth*, which increasingly appears in the media. The meaning of scientific discourse in relation to the facts changes and is transferred to the level of emotions. Here, it becomes another source of crisis at universities, however it falls within a new interpretation.

The Decalogue and the typology of crises at universities

The Decalogue as a code of ethics contains rules of conduct to guide people who believe in Christianity and Judaism. *The ten words*, as this is the Greek meaning of the word decalogue, “created (...) for the benefit of a small nation (...) conquered the moral imagination of half of the world – above the barriers of languages, races, religions and cultures”². This set of moral standards is unchanging and valid in any place and at any time for these religious groups. As a rule, it does not allow any exemption from compliance with the commandments in part or whole. To review the existing Poles’ approach to the canon, it is worth to present the results of CBOS survey from 2016³. It shows that 80% of respondents find it important to have moral principles. 21% of these declare adherence to such principles in any situations, 39% accept deviations only in exceptional cases and 20% accept free verification depending on circumstances of everyday life. In a country where 92% of respondents describe themselves as Catholics⁴, religion is an important sphere of life. Interesting results are shown when combining morality with religion, as such combination is important for 42% of respondents, but 30% of those claim that they can do well without religious justification. The majority, 48%, put their own conscience over religion, and 10% do not consider such issues. Thus, the Poles, regardless of the regularity of religious practice, approve the existence of moral principles and refer to them. It is worth to quote the results of studies that show the approach to morality determined by the principles of Catholicism. In a country where nine out of ten

² A. Szostkiewicz, *Dekalog i Polacy* [Decalogue and Poles], “Polityka” 2001, no 37, pp. 3–9.

³ CBOS, *Zasady moralne a religia* [Moral principles and religion], study message no 4, Warszawa 2017.

⁴ The results of the study “Current problems and events” carried out by CBOS on 1-11 December 2016 on the representative random sample of 1136 adult Polish citizens.

respondents describe themselves as Catholics, the principles of this religion are the best and sufficient basis for morality for 18% (among Catholics, this indicator is 19%). A group of those, who think that the Catholic moral principles are partly right is 46% of all respondents, the same for the group of Catholics. One quarter of respondents (25%, among Catholics 27%) agree with the Catholic principles, but want them to be complemented with other standards. 11% do not follow religious morality, where 8% recognise some of the Catholic principles. This means, the Poles, regardless of religion, refer to Catholic principles in their life.

In the analysis of selected examples, the authors used the symbols referring to the two commandments: *thou shalt not kill* and *thou shalt not steal*. These are heavy sins, considered a serious breach of the social values and standards, punishable by the law. Their appearance in the explored environment of universities calls the crisis situations involving the highest level of risk.

In their publications, Beata Czechowska-Derkacz and Małgorzata Łosiewicz⁵ identified the phenomenon of crisis⁶ from the etymology to the classification. For the record, it should be mentioned that a university crisis is defined as every situation that produces negative reactions among internal and external stakeholders, which in turn disorganises the university's work. Such a crisis does not have different structure, specific for this type of organisation. Universities, as institutions focuses on creation and distribution of knowledge and on creation of relations based on assumed rationality of produced discourse, experience a similar type of crisis as other organisations existing in the public space. Sources of crisis (risk areas) are different. The most common crises at universities are associated with the activities of the students (protests, complaints, organisation of events), scientific dishonesty (plagiarism, grants wangling, misconduct) or non-scientific activity of academic staff and students (involvement in political and social activities).

⁵ B. Czechowska-Derkacz, M. Łosiewicz, *Uczelnie w medialnym kryzysie – dychotomiczny obraz naukowca i uczelni wyższej w mediach* [Universities in media crisis – dichotomic image of a scientist and a University in media], "Naukowy Przegląd Dziennikarski" 2015, no 4 (16), pp. 42–61.

⁶ More on crisis management in the context of communications: I. Kubicz, *Zarządzanie komunikacją w kryzysie – od profilaktyki do sanacji wizerunku. Narzędzia i techniki PR* [Communication management in crisis – prophylactics to image sanation. PR tools and techniques], in: *Zarządzanie w sytuacjach kryzysowych niepewności* [Management in uncertain crisis situations], eds. K. Kubiak, Warszawa 2012; W. Budzyński, *Wizerunek firmy: Kreowanie, zarządzanie, efekty* [Company image: creating, managing, effects], Warszawa 2002; A. Murdoch, *Komunikowanie w kryzysie: Jak ratować wizerunek firmy* [Communication in crisis: how to save company's image], Warszawa 2003; *Komunikacja kryzysowa* [Crisis communication], eds. P.F Anthonissen, Warszawa 2010; M. Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, *Public relations w zarządzaniu sytuacjami kryzysowymi organizacji: Sztuka komunikowania się* [Public relations in crisis situations management in organisation: the art of communication], Warszawa 2015.

***Thou shalt not kill* – the death of students at the University of Technology and Life Sciences in Bydgoszcz**

The subject of analysis in the context of *thou shalt not kill* commandment is the death of students at the University of Technology and Life Sciences (UTP) in Bydgoszcz during hazing and the consequences, which are charges against the organisers and the court case. Study duration is closely associated with the course of events and covers the period from 14 October 2015 to 31 March 2017.

The study used a base of texts, shared with authors by the Institute of Media Monitoring, which was prepared on the basis of a detailed specification of the research assumptions. Verification of texts took place using the following key words: *University of Technology and Life Sciences (UTP), tragedy, students, death, Bydgoszcz, charges, rector*. Selected materials were submitted to quantitative study, content analysis and corpus-based research.

The study involved 53 press articles and 208 internet portals, which gave 1407 publications in total. The press published 259 articles, and portals – 1148, which means that almost every fifth material describing tragic events appeared in print. This is a very good result, considering the fact that internet offers great possibilities in terms of distribution of content, where such possibilities are not the case for printed versions. A detailed list of the number of articles for various media in the years 2015-2017 is illustrated by Figure 1.

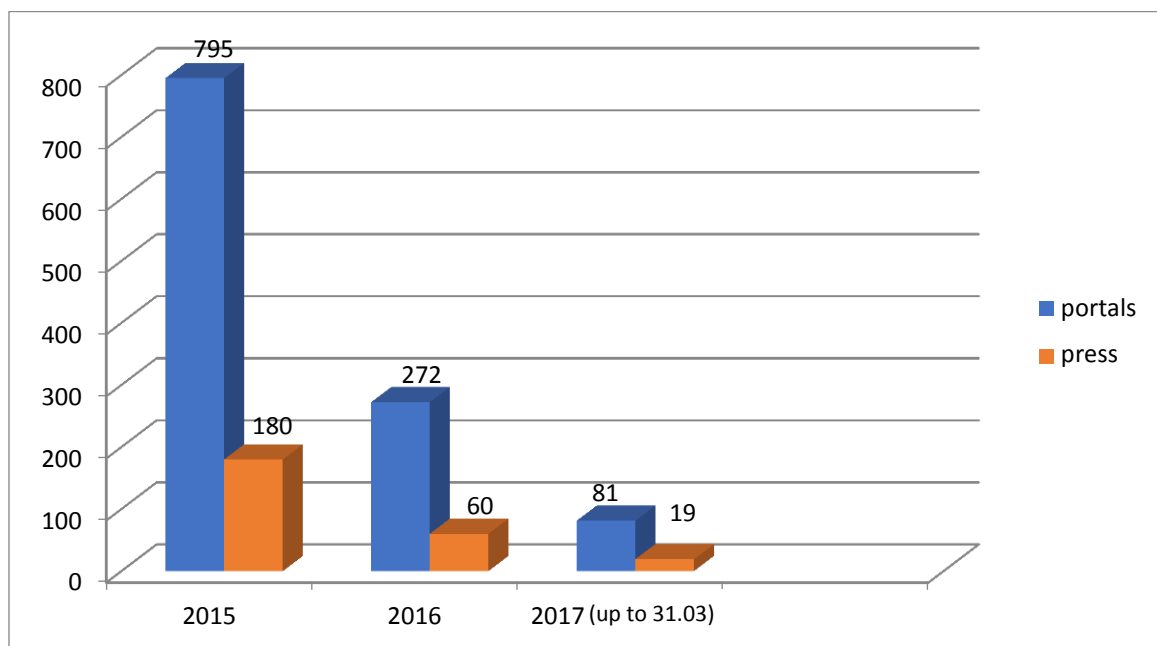


Figure 1. Number of articles in years 2015-2017 by the of media
Source: own study based on materials provided by IMM.

The intensity of interest in the climax is typical for crisis situations – in the present case it is 2015. The number of messages is the largest then and amounts to 975 publications. A year later, when we are dealing with a probe and investigation of the case, the number of messages is reduced to 332, which represents one third of the value achieved in 2015. The first quarter of 2017 years gives 100 publications, whose attention is focused on reports from the courtroom, where the trial takes place.

Looking at the materials published in the press, it is clear that the theme of the tragedy at the UTP was front-page news. It appeared on front pages 100 times, which confirms the high popularity of the theme, which was undertaken in a total of 259 press releases. The theme was presented in press on second pages for 20 times, and on third – 18 times. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the number of articles on the first three pages of newspapers in the following years of publications.

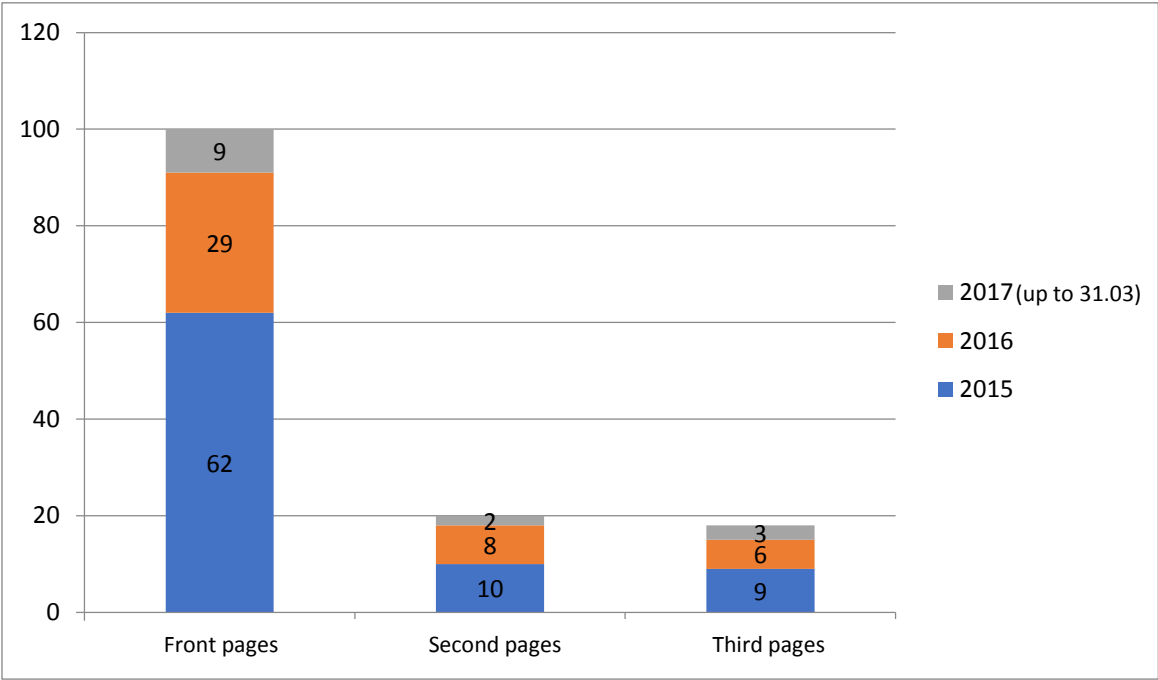


Chart 2. Number of articles about the death of students of UTP in Bydgoszcz on front pages
Source: own study based on materials provided by IMM.

It is clear that the highest frequency of communication occurred in 2015, when the event took place, and directly after. This is five times greater than the number of articles in 2016. In the first quarter of 2017 already 18 press releases appeared, related to the reports during the court hearings.

The time of appearance of messages can be divided into three periods: tragedy – year 2015, after the tragedy – year 2016, when there are allegations of prosecution against four

people: the president of the student government, UTP Rector, Vice-Rector for Student Affairs and head of security. The third period is year 2017 – the questioning of witnesses and the court trial.

Based on the analysis conducted, we can distinguish three approaches in presentation of crises at Polish universities in the media:

- news-like approach
- informative, factual approach
- reporting approach, which has a nature of a report.

Each of them is characterised by other resources used in the preparation of the title, lead or content. The news-like approach is distinguished by high dynamics of communication in relation to each of the three elements of the article. It is accented by journalists by using the titles, and then consistently in leads and collocations content. In the first period, the most numerous collocations are: *tragedy at the UTP, tragedy in Bydgoszcz, tragedy at the initiation ceremony, the death of a 19-year-old student at UTP, death of the students, death in Bydgoszcz, it was carnage, panic killed them, Paulina suffocated, students trampling each other, trampled by colleagues, trampled by crowd, heavily wounded, wounded after initiation ceremony, wounded after party*. Emotions are emphasised. The second approach is devoid of emotional colouration, dominant in the first phase. Here, we can observe collocations associated with the *investigation (on the deaths/on tragedy/on events)* and *prosecution*. The third, reporting approach, accurately reports the course of testimonies from the courtroom. Dominant collocations for the event are: *trial on the tragedy, witnesses testified, witnesses before the court, indictment*.

For the media, news-like nature of the communication is the crucial element that attracts the audience, which is confirmed by the number of publications: as much as 261 different sources published their texts in 2015. In subsequent years, this number was reduced.

***Thou shalt not steal* –grants wangling at AGH at Wroclaw University of Science and Technology**

The subject of analysis of media communications in the context of the *thou shalt not kill* commandment is the grants wangling at universities during the period of clearly increased interest in grants in the media. This seems related to the broader emergence of this thematic area in the public space (for key word *grants for research*, there was an increase reported in Google search from 527,000 results in 2013 to 1,020,000 in 2016, which is an increase of 93%). These include information of Ministry of Science and Higher Education (MNiSW) on

the financing of science (researchers have to earn grants for research on their own), new sources of this financing (competitions of National Science Centre, National Centre for Research and Development in Poland, Foundation for Polish Science, Norwegian funds, EU framework programmes and others), or key words associated with innovation. For comparison, the negative context of key word *grants wangling* shows an increase of 547% (in 2013 there were 9,510 records and in 2016 – 61,600). News-like nature of this kind of reports, which are part of controversial, unusual and crisis topics, results in their increased range.

The analysis involved selected cases of research grants wangling at two among the best Polish universities – Wrocław University of Science and Technology (PWr) and AGH University of Science and Technology. In the case of PWr, research covers the period from 1 April to 30 September 2016, while in the case of AGH – from 1 to 31 March 2017. Texts have been selected on the basis of the following key words: *Wrocław University of Science and Technology (PWr), AGH University of Science and Technology, wangling, grants*.

In the studied period, there were 110 texts released about the grants wangling at PWr, 90% of which were published on internet portals (99 materials) and 10% in press (11 articles). In the case of AGH, it was a total of 136 texts, of which the portals are 97% (132 materials), press – 3% (4 articles). The space of emergence of negative university image in the context of scientific dishonesty is primarily the internet, which is illustrated by Figure 3.

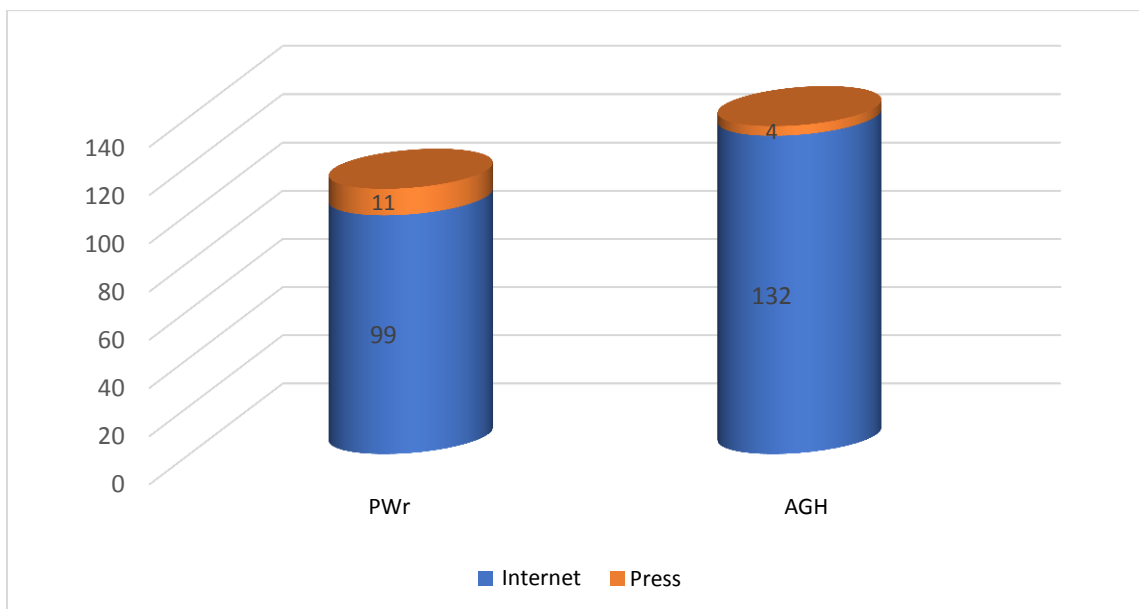


Figure 3. The number of articles on grants wangling at AGH and PWr on the internet and in the press

Source: own study based on IMM materials IMM.

Small representativeness of these texts in the press and complicated matter of mechanisms of extortions prevent its attractive description, influences their poor display on the front pages. One article (about PWr) was published on the first and the second page, the others are exposed on further pages – from the fourth to the twelfth.

Emerging collocations in titles of articles about extortions are: *researchers arrested, researchers suspected, fraud/scammers, scandal at the university, affair at the university, fraud at the university, plagiarism, court, indictment, charges, prison*. The very fact that the names of the universities, their authorities (*rector/pro-rector*) and the word *researcher* are placed in the context of such negative words cause major image-related problems.

Reports related to extortion of funds within the framework of scientific grants at PWr include two threads. The first one concerns the indictment, made by prosecutor's office in Legnica in 2015 against prof. Adam J. from PWr and allegations against his colleagues, doctoral candidates and their spouses. They allegedly swindled PLN 1.7 million from MNiSW for research works in the field of IT, which were in fact never conducted (additional topic was plagiarism). The second thread from 2016 is about the arrest of PWr rector along with several researchers from the Department of Mechanics, who, using the false documentation, allegedly extorted PLN 265,000 from MNiSW for funding of research projects.

Small time distance between both threads described in the media and complex mechanisms of these scams made the readers combine them together into one thread, which reinforces the negative image effect of the universities suffering from corruption.

In the case of the first thread, articles on extortions appeared already in 2013. The extensive cycle of texts that are part of the *storytelling* formula, were published in the "Gazeta Wyborcza". The main characters were prof. Adam J. and his doctoral candidates, who presented their own versions of events to "Gazeta Wyborcza". The almost movie-like criminal story is strengthened by the titles: *Professor's cooperative. Who is the godfather or the Polish science* and leads: "I felt like the protagonists in the movie »The Debt«. Everything I did, and even myself, Professor considered his property"⁷. Public confidence in scientists as a social group is undermined by emphasised uniqueness of professor Adam J as one of the best specialists in IT and automation. All relations from 2013 on this topic are news, sensational,

⁷ J. Harlukowicz, *Sztuczna inteligencja* [Artificial intelligence], „Duży Format. Gazeta Wyborcza” 2013, p. 4. http://www.archiwum.wyborcza.pl/Archiwum/1,0,7800088,20131017RP-TDF,Sztuczna_Inteligencja,.html [accessed: 20.03.2017].

enhanced with titles, as in the case of the tabloid “Fakt” – *Scandal in the scientific world! Gang of professor crooks*⁸.

Information from 2015, when we already see a description of the allegations, fall within the category of informational and substantive presentation, as well as relations. Along with titles of sensational nature: *Corruption scandal at the Wrocław University of Science and Technology. Gang of professor crooks in the dock*, there are also descriptive titles: *Researchers from the Wrocław University of Science and Technology accused*.

In the case of extortion of money for grants at AGH, in connection with the initial stage of the case and the detention of researchers, journalists’ presentations show a lot of caution – there are phrases like “supposed have extorted” and question marks; the articles fall in category of reports with a nature of relation, which is emphasised by descriptive titles: *Scientists from the AGH suspected of swindling millions on grants, Scientists from the AGH suspected of corruption. The university is responsible*. Words *scam, corruption, affair, scandal* are seen in titles for 15 times, while *researcher suspect /extorted/detained* – 105 times.

In the case of universities, we can distinguish risk areas that are characteristic for them, where crisis situations are placed, related to the violation of commonly accepted social standards. At the same time, the dynamics of the crisis associated with the violation of the fundamental norms is not significantly different from the others. Research on crisis situations that involve the highest level of risk at universities show that for the media the most important way of reporting is the strongly emotional news-like approach.

Emotionality in reception – “experiencing the crisis”

The phenomenon of intense but short life of crisis information in the media, as shown in the described examples of the highest level of risk, is not new. Shortening of the life of information in the media is visible in time and is often explained as a consequence of the intensification of information exchange and changes in perceptual and psychological conditions in which contemporary member of the communication community functions. An important dimension of occurring change, however, is denial of the universal discourse of the classical theory of truth, understood as a relationship between the state of things and objective information about that state of things. Media phenomenon of the *post-truth*, a dispute about

⁸ *Affair in scientific world! Gang of professor crooks*, Fakt24.pl 2013
<http://www.fakt.pl/wydarzenia/polska/gang-naukocow-lapowkarzy-zatrzymany/s4x3rfh> [accessed: 20.03.2017].

which continues, becomes a helpful category of interpretation in an attempt to understand the emotional description of the situations involving the highest level of risk.

Leaving aside the philosophical difficulties with the concept of truth, it should be noted that in the popular consciousness it is shaped primarily by the tension between the information given in the media and the state of affairs described. Media emphasising the emotional aspects of the crisis, as opposed to the internal discourse of universities, will run away from the classical theory of truth, as an ideal not only impossible to implement in today's communication space, but also pragmatically inefficient distribution model. Significant acceleration of the information flow and reduced life of the messages require synthetic approach, providing evaluation, and not stimulating its self-production, which is the basis of the academic style of thinking. Violations of the fundamental principles such as the principle of the prohibition of killing or stealing generate evident and clear communications and equally obvious evaluations. The recipient responds for such emotional violation, regardless of whether such violation actually occurred. He suspends the function of information as the facts provided, so he can "experience" the crisis.

Post-truth, as a method of functioning in the information space, allows to recognise that the information is paramount and is the only platform for the evaluation of this crisis as a phenomenon. In case of violation of fundamental values, it is important that the violation "did" happen, and not "how" it happened. In such a communication space the recipients of the mass messages, especially those with lower cultural and communicational competence, are vulnerable to manipulation by highly persuasive crisis messages. Expertly emphasised emotional components make it difficult or even impossible to rationally judge the information received, so all that remains is to receive emotions contained in given materials. Emotionally emphasised violation and infringement of ethics do not require justification, but acceptance. The university as the crisis space is in extremely difficult situation in this context. As a "manufactory" of knowledge, it bears particular responsibility, especially in a situation where the university itself fits into the area of rationality, as depositary of tradition of rationalism. An additional dimension of such a university's image is the focus on explaining, inquiry, showing objective conditions and various aspects of the case. Such construction itself seems to create deep crises.

Conclusions

The crisis is one of the elements of the functioning of the university, which significantly affects its image. The ability to communicate in a crisis situation thus becomes a key

competence, while presentation of higher education school in the media requires extensive knowledge and experience. The analysed crisis situations of the highest level of risk, when human life and health are in danger, and when there comes to corruption and fraud, are characterised by specific structure. In the first phase of the crisis, assessment of the situation plays the important role. In the context of violation of social norms having their reference in the Decalogue, it is also a moral evaluation. This first period is very intense, but short, and the recipient is focused on crisis “experiencing” and assessments. In the subsequent stages, the substantive, informative and relating dimension of the information is characteristic.

Situations of risk at universities in the context of the commandments of the Decalogue and the related social norms relevant to the recipient require further study. For now, as it is clear from the CBOS studies of 2016, scientists among the twenty-four rated professional groups are perceived as the most honest and reliable ones, with an average rating of 3.73 (behind them there are nurses, IT specialists and teachers). This rating little changes over the years. In 1997, the average rating was 3.78, and scientists consistently remain in the first place⁹. However, in a situation, when phenomena like dishonesty and scientific unreliability raise the audience’s interest, the way crisis situations are presented in media is important, which significantly influences the image of scientists and universities, thus translating to the ratings.

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