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Crisis communication during the red sludge spill disaster in Hungary—a media content analysis-based investigation

Gabor Sarlos¹ and Gyorgy Szondi^{2*}

¹ *ELTE University, Budapest, Hungary*

² *School of Media, Bournemouth University, Poole, UK*

The article analyses the media coverage of red sludge spill, one of Hungary's largest crises. The study focuses on the analysis of stakeholder communication through their media representation, including the patterns, frames and messaging of the key stakeholder groups. It is found that stakeholder groups create their own framing and messaging and therefore give impetus to the creation of parallel realities. The scope of the analysis has allowed for the analysis of longitudinal changes and identification of trends in the behaviour of the media. Copyright © 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

4 October 2010 saw one of the largest industrial accidents in the history of Hungary. The break of a waste depot dam storing millions of tons of red sludge resulted in the deaths of 10 people and wounded more than 120 people. Several villages (including Devecser and Kolontar) were devastated, and over 1000 ha of arable land was affected. The original flood of 700 000 m³ of sludge (waste from the process that converts bauxite to aluminium) turned into a 2-m high torrent and covered a vast area with an 8 to 10 cm high toxic red sludge surface. The disaster not only has left its mark on the natural settings and the entire area's livelihood but has had serious economic, political and social consequences as well.

The catastrophe and its aftermath was covered extensively by both the national and international media, making it a truly high-profile crisis. The torrent of red sludge, local citizens, animals, houses and streets covered in red mud and the clean-up operations created very strong and dramatic visual images for the media. In the Hungarian media alone,

several thousands articles and reports were published and aired about the disaster and its aftermath.

The crisis communication literature focuses on planning and effectively managing communication during and after a crisis from an organization's perspective and how the crisis can affect the organization's reputation or performance (e.g. Coombs, 2012; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007). The emphasis is on the organization and its reputation as several crisis communication strategies and tactics are outlined about how to turn the crisis into an opportunity sometimes even at the expenses of certain stakeholder groups. Several books provide guidelines about the necessary skills and 'know-how' of dealing with the media during the crisis (e.g. Haddow & Haddow, 2009). Less attention has been devoted to the stakeholders' perspectives and how they use a particular crisis as an opportunity to communicate their own views in relation to the actual crisis or in a broader perspective, which may be politically or economically motivated.

Single-case studies dominate crisis communication research, whereas systematic analysis of media coverage has been utilized less frequently. Media content analysis is often used to determine whether the organization's messages have got across or how the storyline evolved. The aims of the article are to analyse how the red sludge disaster was covered

Correspondence to: Gyorgy Szondi, School of Media, Bournemouth University, Fern Barrow, Poole, Dorset, BH12 5BB, UK.
E-mail: szondipr@gmail.com

by the Hungarian media and to answer the following research questions:

- What prominence did the media attribute to the crisis and what stages of crisis emerge from the coverage?
- Which key issues dominated the media coverage in the different stages of the crisis?
- Who were the dominant stakeholder groups in the media coverage and which crisis communication strategies are manifested by these stakeholder groups?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A crisis is usually defined from an organizational perspective and in terms of (negative) outcomes, as the following widely cited definition demonstrates: 'the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectations of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes' (Coombs, 2012, p. 2.). Other definitions of crises are broader and go beyond those prevalent in the communication and public relations literature. Rosenthal, 't Hart, and Charles (1989), for example, defined crisis as 'serious threat to the basic structures of the fundamental values and norms of a social system, which—under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances—necessitates making critical decisions' (p. 10).

There exist several typologies of crises based on technological, organizational, economic, human, external or internal dimensions (e.g. Shrivastava & Mitroff, 1987; Lerbinger, 1997). In the public relations literature, industrial accidents are often classified as technological crises (Ulmer *et al.*, 2007; Lerbinger, 1997; Zaremba, 2010), and the implicit assumption is that organizational crisis communication and management principles apply to these type of complex crises as well. As Shrivastava *et al.* (1988) argue, industrial crises cannot be dealt with at the level of single organizations, as they tend to be both organizational and inter-organizational phenomena. The same can be argued from a crisis communication perspective as well. In other scholarship, however, industrial crises are also typified as environmental crises, characterized as a threat to biological values or to the human habitat including essential resources that support life in human ecosystems, such as air, water supply and food production (Stern, 2003). Shrivastava *et al.* (1988) identified a number of defining characteristics of industrial crises, including a sudden destructive triggering event, which has a low probability and therefore warnings are not taken

seriously; large-scale damage to human life and environment, and large social and economic costs; multiple stakeholder involvement with numerous conflicts over responsibility, liability and recovery costs. The authors also note that the media coverage of industrial accidents can be fragmented, lack objective data and can be equivocal partly because of stakeholders' tendency to control information.

Several crisis life cycle models have been developed as a framework for crisis management. Fink's (1986) four-stage model (prodromal or signal detection, acute, chronic and resolution period) was later extended with a stage before the acute stage of the crisis, identified as the preparation phase (Barton, 1993; Mitroff, 1996). The five-stage model shows a sharp increase in the first two stages: signal detection and preparation phase, culminating in the actual explosion of the crisis and then gradually declining throughout the acute, chronic and resolution phases. Coombs' (2012) three-stage model (pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis) is commonly used in the public relations literature as a comprehensive framework for crisis management analysis.

The general pattern of media coverage of natural and industrial accidents reflects an 'exploding' media coverage right after the outbreak of the crisis, followed by a slow but steady decline in media interest. Ullberg (2001) noted that in the case of environmental crises, it can be difficult to establish when they are considered to be over. This factor can have some implications for the models of the crisis life cycle, as there may be crises that do not necessarily follow a cyclical pattern.

In order to analyse stakeholder responses to the crisis, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) may serve as a framework (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). SCCT identified three crisis patterns regarding their attributions of crisis responsibility. The victim cluster introduces the given organization as a passive and non-responsible player with weak attributions of crisis responsibility. In these cases, the organization is presented as a victim of the event. The accidental cluster has some but limited attributions of responsibility in the crisis, as the occurrence of the event is considered beyond the intentions or control of the organization. The intentional cluster has very strong attributions of responsibility in the crisis and the event may even be considered purposeful. In terms of framing, there are differences between the stakeholder groups. The way one shapes their message shapes how others identify problems and the causes of the problems and attribute responsibility as well as the solution to the problems (Cooper, 2002). Framing therefore allows the communicators to choose given factors to emphasis and others to neglect.

Media and the construction of reality

According to the media's agenda-setting function (McCombs & Shaw, 1995: 153), the media extends its activities beyond the mere representation of events, and through the selection and formulation of content, it takes part in the construction of realities. It can reach the extent where elements thought of key importance by the media are in fact those that become key in the mindset of the audience (McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, & Llamas, 2000, McCombs, 2004). Individual construction of reality depends on a number of factors. Physical distance, availability of first-hand experience and complexity of the issue are all factors that influence the level of independent construction of reality. The majority of the public constructs reality based upon media and cannot match this reality against their own direct experience. In the case of coverage of such a flow of events, media becomes selective; it creates its own representation and therefore actively takes part in the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research questions, media content analysis was conducted. During content analysis, it was intended to interpret texts from a qualitative approach as well as rely on the proportions and emphases of the texts through a quantitative analysis. Quantitative approach allows for handling of the material as a mass collection of data (Baker *et al.*, 2008). A wide range of online, print and electronic media were selected over a period of 21 months. The analysis was based on the content analysis of 2152 pieces of coverage (online and print articles and radio and TV reports) about the catastrophe in the Hungarian media between 5 October 2010 and 30 June 2012. Selection of the media aimed to accommodate a range of local, regional and national media as well as a comprehensive overview by the type of media, including online, print, radio and TV. Bearing in mind that coverage of rescue and especially reconstruction operations may have political inclination, a wide spectrum of media has been included in terms of political orientation as well. The 21-month-long period of analysis enabled to assess not only the short-term but also the long-term consequences of the disaster and its media representation.

Following the selection of the media, a coding system was set up. The basic unit of coding was an article. Each article was coded according to a set of criteria: focus, general frame, tone, source of information, media and stakeholder involvement. Analysis

was carried out by two well-trained coders, with their coding being controlled on a randomly selected basis. The coded data were then used to identify the communication strategies and patterns of the different stakeholder groups.

FINDINGS

Prominence

A total of 2152 pieces of media coverage that were published or aired between October 2010 and June 2012 were analysed. On a quarterly basis (October–December 2010, January–March, April–June, July–September and October–December 2011, as well as January–March and April–June 2012), media coverage of the disaster fluctuated, as Chart 1 demonstrates.

The graph of the media coverage shows two periods of outstanding intensity: October–December 2010 with 484 articles (5.5 articles/day) and October–December 2011 with 443 articles (4.81 articles/day). A period of low intensity characterized the period of January–March 2011, with 64 articles (0.7 articles/day). Media coverage of the red sludge disaster shows two peaks.

The intensity of coverage implies two deviations from the crisis cycle model. First, in this case, there was no significant build-up phase in the media. In the signal detection period, World Wide Fund (WWF) Hungary had called for the closure of the depot, together with two other bauxite sludge storages in western Hungary. Greenpeace and Levegő Munkacsoport (Clean Air Action Group) raised the alarm too about the potential dangers of the site, but these concerns received limited attention both in the media and among policy makers prior to the break of the dam. Regular controls had been exercised by the relevant environmental authorities; however, no special actions were requested. The starting point of

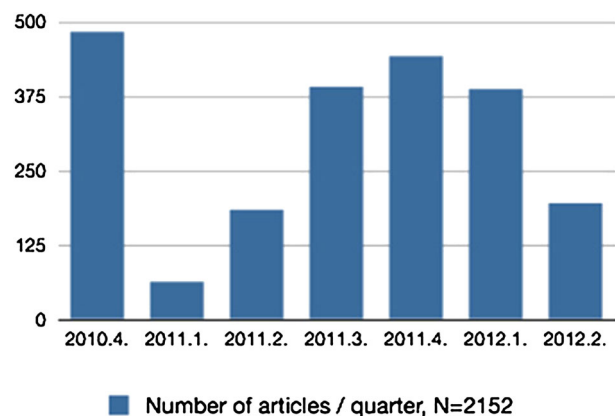


Chart 1 Changes in media coverage intensity

the analysis of the media coverage is the actual break of the dam, as no specific signal detection period could be identified.

Second, the graph indicates two peak periods and a low period in between. The coverage did not show a steady decline in the number of articles or the intensity of coverage, but after a decline, it rose again. Intensity of media coverage did not follow the standard pattern of crises, and fading-out stage followed much later.

Focus issues

Focus categories reflect the selection mechanism and the agenda-setting mechanism of the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The ability of the media to influence focus of attention of the public is present; therefore, it becomes part of the social construction of the representation related to the red sludge catastrophe. The coding of the articles resulted in 21 different focus categories. For ease of handling the data, certain aggregation was carried out according to the following. The quarterly split was changed to incorporate longer periods, resulting in a timescale of four periods of October–December 2010 (3 months), followed by 6 months periods of January–June 2011, July–December 2011 and January–June 2012. The content analysis of articles was conducted to identify the key focus of articles for each of the four periods (Table 1).

Over the full period, among the 21 focus categories, the overall most frequently covered issues are investigation, followed by environmental issues, compensation for damages, other community initiatives, reconstruction work and remediation of damages. The massive presence of the issue investigation implies on the one hand a thorough attempt of the government to shed light on all aspects of the disaster and draw the relevant conclusions as well as keep the issue on the agenda and use this point of reference as frequently as possible on the other hand.

In the first period (acute phase, October–December 2010), the focus is on rescue, remediation of environmental damages and the actual physical and chemical content of the red sludge. The 4 October break in the dam caught the company, the authorities and the local population by total surprise. The general manager of the alumina production company, MAL, tried to reassure everyone by claiming ‘it is enough to wash yourselves with a garden hose’.¹ It quickly

¹Egy slagos lemosás segít (A good wash with a garden hose helps), Index, 5 October 2010, quoting MAL General Manager Zoltán Bakonyi.

turned out that the danger and devastation is much bigger than anyone would have thought. The disaster management authorities and the government representatives quickly took action. On 7 October, Prime Minister Orbán reassured everyone that ‘we will solve the situation’.² The same day, in relation to any assistance from the European Union, he pointed out that ‘it is not foreign financial support that we will need but sharing of experience from similar such situations’.³ Besides the Minister of Home Affairs and the Director General of the Disaster Management Authority, the Prime Minister became one of the three top spokespersons on this issue. He continued to use the occasion to give insight to more general views by saying ‘this case will be handled differently than how these have ever been handled’⁴ (11 October), and ‘someone has to be responsible for all what has happened. Responsibility and punishment has to be proportionate to the damage caused and the values perished’⁵ (11 October). Swift actions in rescue as well as communication reflect a clear drive for centralization. Initial and sporadic MAL representative interviews disappeared; the company did not communicate. Then, under a law passed with emergency, within 1 week, the company was put under the management of a government commissioner. In terms of representation of the company in the media, this meant the company was forced to give up independent communication.

In period 2 (chronic phase, January–June 2011), no focal issue can be identified, except for a slight shift to general plans and tasks for the future. Winter conditions made actual rescue and reconstruction operations difficult, and the media were dominated by general plans of compensation and reconstruction. The search for the responsible parties continued with the government emphasizing the sole responsibility of the company. However, in this period, it became evident that the issue of responsibility is highly complex and may involve negligence in planning of the depot and the insufficient control mechanisms of the environmental authorities. Locals gave voice that in spite of the emergency compensation they had received, their village ‘will remain in

²Száz halott is lehetett volna Kolontáron (There could have a hundred deaths in Kolontár), ATV, 7 October 2010, quoting Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

³Amerikában is téma a magyar iszapkatasztrófa (Hungarian sludge catastrophe is an issue in the USA, too), *hetivalasz.hu*, 7 October 2010, quoting Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

⁴Sarkosan fogalmazva (Just to make it clear), *Magyar Hírlap*, 11 October 2010, quoting Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

⁵Kármentő alapot hoz létre a kormány (Government sets up damage fund), *Népszabadság*, 11 October 2010, quoting Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

Table 1 Distribution of articles according to their focus

Focus	Oct–Dec 2010	Jan–June 2011	July–Dec 2011	Jan–June 2012	TOTAL
Local initiatives	2	2	—	3	7
Impact on tourism	2	—	6	—	8
Transport, traffic	5	—	—	7	12
Others	1	—	23	1	25
Chemical composition of sludge	28	4	4	1	37
MAL company communication	10	—	21	15	46
Abuse of resources	1	4	40	2	47
Tasks for the future	4	9	31	9	53
Agricultural issues	4	3	22	34	63
Personal stories, testimonies	26	11	19	9	65
General plans for the future	3	25	19	22	69
Health aspects	20	4	12	40	76
Experience and conclusions	16	19	37	4	76
Rescue operations	72	4	7	4	87
Remediation of damages	62	5	36	7	110
Reconstruction work	3	11	76	29	119
Other community initiative	45	23	68	3	139
Compensation for damages	33	32	83	22	170
Environmental issues	31	9	55	90	185
Investigation	21	22	156	134	333
Complex, multifocus article	95	62	120	148	425
Total	484	251	835	584	2152

Outstanding activity in italics.

our minds as Chernobyl'.⁶ Signs of discontentment also appear by locals claiming that 'even if we did receive emergency relief, everything is decided by the biggies'.⁷ Opposition members of the parliament claimed that reconstruction deals all end up with companies close to the current government parties and say that 'responsibility of the catastrophe is with everyone and cannot be put only on one company'.⁸

In period 3 (resolution phase, July–December 2011), the intensity of communication increases considerably. Communication has a clear focus and is dominated by the issues related to investigation, followed by compensation, reconstruction and other community initiatives. Most articles about abuse of resources and tasks for the future appear in this period. Government communication focused on the issues of investigation, legal aspects, court trial and compensation issues. A government party representative expressed that 'nowhere in the world has any government made such actions in case of an industrial accident'.⁹ A government commissioner of the

company claimed that putting the company under government control 'had been a total innovation in the world, and a successful one'.¹⁰ On the first anniversary of the disaster, numerous remembrance events were organized, and the first newly built houses were handed over. However, in spite of the government-led swift efforts in recultivation and reconstruction, locals feel disillusioned: 'This was red sludge only for a few hundred, for all others this was gold sludge'.¹¹ Greenpeace reminded everyone that the overwhelming majority of toxic waste is still stored in similar depots, putting a constant danger on the country.

According to the crisis life cycle models, the resolution phase is the last stage of crisis. However, in this case, the crisis does not follow this model and shows signs of an extended further phase. In period 4 (January–June 2012), there is a continued focus on investigation, followed by a rapidly growing number of articles on environmental effects, health and agriculture-related issues. A new set of issues appear that represent the long-term consequences of the disaster and relate to the significant changes in the environment, living conditions and social

⁶A nap idézete (Quote of the day), Napi Gazdaság, 11 February 2011, quoting a local citizen.

⁷Ki kapja az iszapmilliárdokat? (Who will get the sludge billions?), Index, 11 February 2011, quoting a local citizen.

⁸Becsődöltek a hatóságok (The authorities failed), Népszabadság, 7 April 2011, quoting opposition MP Benedek Jávör.

⁹Élet a vörösiszap után (Life after the red sludge), kisalfold.hu, 19 August 2011, quoting government MP József Ekes.

¹⁰Jöhet a kötelező biztosítás a cégeknek (Liability insurance for companies is on the way), privatbankar.hu, 22 September 2011, government commissioner György Bakondi.

¹¹Aranyiszap (Gold sludge), nol.hu, 26 September 2011, claim of local citizens.

structures. As reflected in the media, the public seemed to realize eventually that effects of the red sludge spill will remain for a long time. Social, economic and health consequences as well as human psychological dramas will stay for decades. Eighteen months after the disaster, a non-governmental organization (NGO) warned that dry weather and wind still created unbearable dust and highly poisonous air: 'First I thought our device went wrong indicating 2000 mikrogram/m³ dust instead of the normal 10 mikrogram/m³.'¹² A trade union representative of the workers of the alumina plant claimed that 'closing of the alumina plant will clearly lead to a human catastrophe as most of the families living in the area make their living through the production'.¹³ The lawyer representing claimants concluded by expressing: 'The handling of the catastrophe is even more serious than the catastrophe itself'.¹⁴ Clearly, certain implications of the disaster prevail; therefore, this period should be called the enduring phase.

Stakeholders in the media coverage

In the media analysis, special attention was devoted to interviews with and references to stakeholder groups and their representatives. These media opportunities provided stakeholder representatives the chance to provide clear framing to their messages. The aggregated number of the appearance of the individuals of the same stakeholder group gives an indication about the weight of the given stakeholder group. During the analysis, those interviews were considered that presented the views of one individual only, and the article did not cover any other aspect, individual or entity. In total, 45 interviews appeared in the given period¹⁵ (Table 2).

The interview chart shows an uneven representation of stakeholder groups. Government representatives took almost 50% of the interviews, with the Prime Minister being the most frequently interviewed person. Besides the government representatives, only locals have a notable representation through their mayors. Other stakeholders appear

only sporadically, whereas no representative of MAL has been interviewed at all.

References and quotes

The circle of interviews can be extended to include those articles that include a quote by or reference to a statement given by a representative of the particular stakeholder group. In these cases, those articles are considered that include a direct quote of a stakeholder group representative or give a clear reference to the words that the given person has said. In case of an article where more than one person has been quoted or referred to, the three most important representations were considered, on the basis of the length of the quote and the focus of the article.

A total of 672 references are included and analysed (Chart 2).

The chart covering the number of references and quotes gives a more balanced composition on whose opinion had been represented in the media. Government representative quotes appear most frequently, with over one-third of all quotes, followed by references to representatives of local communities, disaster management people and MAL. Through their quotes, all the important stakeholder groups are represented in the media, even if notable differences exist in their relative weight.

Stakeholder strategies and messaging

The analysis shows that government messages (from the Minister of State for Environmental Affairs,¹⁶ the Minister of Home Affairs and the Prime Minister) were most reflected in the media. Their deconstruction of the case implies a serious accident that had occurred because of the negligent attitude and irresponsible actions of a private company. The government, as representative of the country's interest, had to act promptly, and this is what they did. With the government's strong determination and focused actions, the immediate danger was eliminated, recultivation of the land and construction of new houses and communal buildings have been done and compensation for the lost assets has been paid. In their narrative, the government is positioned in the centre of rescue and recovery operations. Nevertheless, the price all has to be borne by the company, and this will be forced through by all possible legal

¹²Fuldoklanak Kolontáron a vörös portól (People suffocate of red dust in Kolontar), blikk.hu, 18 May 2012, Gergely Simon, Greenpeace expert.

¹³Családok tízezreinek megélhetése került veszélybe (The living of ten thousands of families is in danger), napi.hu, 25 May 2012.

¹⁴Titkolóznak a vörösiszap ügyében (Being secretive in the red sludge affair), Népszava, 31 May 2012, György Magyar, lawyer representing claimants.

¹⁵Further 37 interviews were made with local citizens, but these were not considered for further analysis.

¹⁶In Hungary, on a government level, the environmental issues are represented by the Minister of State for Environmental Affairs, within the Ministry of Rural Development.

Table 2 Distribution of interviews

Stakeholder group	Number of interviews	Individual interviewee	Function	Number of interviews
Government	20	Viktor Orbán	Prime Minister	9
		Zoltán Illés	Minister of State for Environment	8
		Sándor Pintér	Minister of Home Affairs	3
Disaster management (Other) politicians	2	György Bakondi	Government Commissioner	2
	4	Benedek Jávor	Opposition MP	2
Local communities	11	Lajos Kepli	Opposition MP	2
		Tamás Toldi	Mayor of Devecser	5
		Károly Tili	Mayor of Kolontár	4
Non-governmental organizations	4	Loránd Kerecsi	Deputy mayor of Gulács	2
		Zsolt Szegfalvi	Director of Greenpeace	2
Experts	4	Gergely Simon	Expert of Greenpeace	2
		Béla Farkas	Director of Tatai Környezeti ZRt.	2
		Attila Turi	Architect	2
Total	45			45

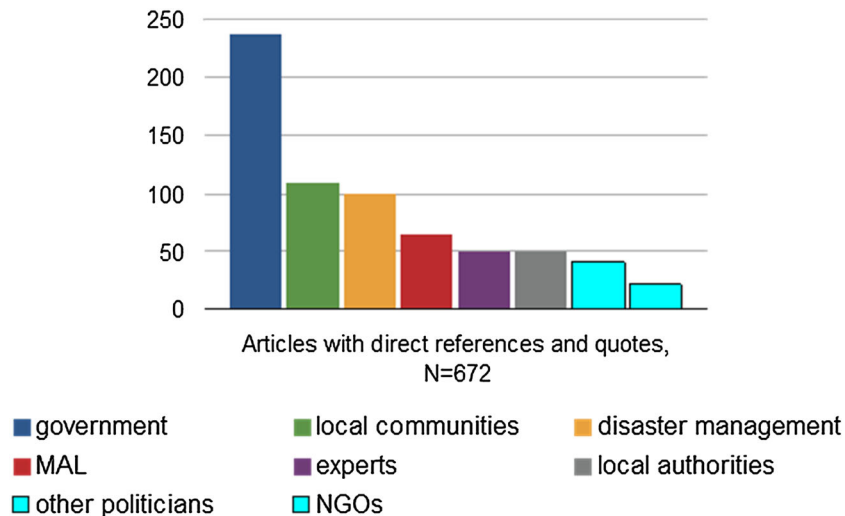


Chart 2 Distribution of references

means and economic pressures. In overall terms, the communication of the government underlined competence and responsibility and often served as an illustration to political messages. As to the SCCT, the case matches the intentional cluster where the sole responsibility is with the company.

The second most often quoted sources are the representatives of the local governments, generally the mayors, and authorities of the affected villages. Their interpretation reflects a delicate position: representation of the interest of and contact with the villagers on the one hand and liaison with the national authorities, government and the disaster management directorate on the other hand. Usually, in their reflections, they express their concerns freely, share cases of local successes and failures

and praise various forms of assistance their villages had received. Their communication reflected a careful balancing among the various stakeholder groups and a strong sensitivity to the needs of the local people. In their framing, it is not the reason of the accident that is important but much more to find proper solutions in terms of compensation and reconstruction and to do everything possible to reestablish reasonable living conditions. Their approach to the issue of responsibility is that they have a dual-sided view towards MAL. They tend to agree that the accident is the consequence of negligence on the company's side; however, they do not see confrontation, as the company is the most significant employer in the region. They prefer to focus on themselves: in SCCT terms, they follow a victim cluster typology

where they seek sympathy and support from the other stakeholder groups.

A further important actor is the Disaster Management Authority, headed by its Director General. The representation value of this person is further underlined by him being the government commissioner for the company as well. Starting from a low-profile government authority, along with the development of the crisis, the Disaster Management Authority becomes a significant stakeholder in itself. It becomes also clear that the roles of representing a national authority as well as a private company that has been put under government control are clearly contradicting both the principles and the practice of clear communication. In the first two periods, the narrative of the Disaster Management Authority focused on the technicalities of the operations, whereas later, it enters more into the evaluation of the handling of the whole process. As the official centre of source of information, the Authority puts focus on the strong technicality of their messages. As a newly created function, it also focused on underlining its own role and competence. However, this was later weakened by the confusing double function of its Director General.

The views of the company itself are underrepresented in the media and, if at all, are expressed through their lawyers. As members of the management as well as the company are facing trials, lawyers seem to offer the only possible channels to express company views. Their construction of the reality is that a natural disaster happened. The company had acted all times at its best, followed the rules of corporate governance and was regularly checked by the relevant authorities. It is ready to take their part in sharing the costs of the reconstruction and of the compensation of the people. Following the initial shock and clear proof of unpreparedness, the key message from the company was to show cooperation and sympathy even if repeatedly they related the disaster to a natural cause. In its actions, the company was playing for time and survival. From the SCCT perspective, the company represented the accidental cluster where the company could not have done anything more or better in face of the natural disaster.

Non-governmental organization representatives and independent experts are the last notable group of public actors in the media. Clearly, Greenpeace and, to a lesser extent, Clean Air Action Group dominate this relatively tiny segment, the first one primarily through its action, the second through its expert opinion. Of all stakeholders, they had been warning about the issue long before the actual spill took place. They started in the build-up phase and are looking at

the long-term effects and consequences. NGOs proved they had an important role in being watchdogs of industrial activities. Independent experts give their views about specific aspects of the accident, the emergency operations, the handling of the case and the emerging consequences. It also became clear that with barely sufficient resources, the continuous media presence of NGOs and experts cannot be achieved.

The weight of each stakeholder group is reflected by the presence of their framing in the media. Clearly, the dominance of the issue of investigation prevails; it is by far the most frequently covered topic. It is in the focus of government communication; consequently, this proves that the framing of the government was successful with the industrial accident interpretation. In this narrative, the intentional cluster is valid, and the company is the sole responsible actor for the catastrophe.

The performance of media

Analysis of the media coverage shows that upon the outbreak of the disaster, all media outlets shared a similar vision of reality. Articles similarly depicted the breakout of the accident, the first reactions, rescue operations and the nature and size of the disaster. In a later stage, however, parallel to how the government centralized disaster operations as well as communication output, the media added different perspectives to the interpretation of the issue. Division of the media can be clearly noted from the coverage of a number of issues: legal process against the company, the exact use of the individual donations, the utilization of government funds, the chances of local companies and national companies taking part in the work of reconstruction, the centralized and standardized construction of new living houses and the finish of the continuation of the reconstruction process. Furthermore, notable differences appear according to the representation of the government's long-term recovery actions and in the distinction between 'soft' and 'hard' reconstruction. Further analysis of these issues may indicate that political affiliation of media may influence their attitude towards the coverage of these issues. However, a detailed analysis of whether the choice of focus areas of articles has a direct relation with the political orientation of the given medium extends beyond the frames of the current paper. It may be presumed that the media close to the government clearly focused on the 'hard' aspects of recovery work: physical reconstruction, renovation of old and building of new houses and creation of a

memorial park and a church. With these being in place, media interpretation reflects satisfaction and even pride about the government actions. Similarly, it can be presumed that the media that is more critical towards the government rather underlined the lack of focus on 'soft' reconstruction and drew attention to the various long-term hazards, including human, psychological, environmental and health consequences of the disaster. Their narrative is that without human and social revitalization, no real rebuild can be done. In their interpretation, the affected area is similar to a living organism where all aspects of functioning of life need to be taken care of.

As the time passed and media intensity level started to drop, media turned more in the direction of creating their own narratives. In this function, they are able to construct reality and influence how people see the present and future situations of the area hit by the red sludge disaster.

CONCLUSION

Stakeholder framing and message formulation focused around the SCCT. The government narrative with the intentional cluster successfully channelled media focus on the responsibility of the company and to the issue of investigation. The MAL narrative of accidental cluster and presenting the case as a natural disaster could not counterbalance the government narrative. The victim cluster typology of the local representatives can also be considered successful as to its representation in the media. Local and international NGOs presented a further typology, where a sharing of responsibility is urged. However, their views have not gained much attention of the media and therefore could not influence the competition between narratives. It can be noted that when various narratives live aside each other, it is the media, through its agenda-setting ability, that decides which of the narratives will become dominant. Depending on the media power of the actors, one of the clusters may become dominant.

Moreover, important observations can be noted regarding the crisis life cycle theory. In the red sludge case, the application of crisis life cycle is limited. There was no prodromal or signal detection period noted in the media coverage. Furthermore, the crisis did not end with a resolution phase but continued with the enduring phase. The emergence of this phase is due to two factors: the government's drive to keep the issue of investigation on the agenda and the emergence of a growing number of various long-term consequences of the accident. The existence of the chronic and resolution stages

is given only if no new impetus arrives. In the case of an ongoing crisis or a crisis that changes its form, the fading-out period is difficult to note, and, instead, an enduring phase appears. In terms of the categorization of the red sludge catastrophe, these consequences mean a conceptual shift from being an industrial–natural accident to a complex crisis with environmental, economic, health, psychological and social components.

Finally, the agenda-setting ability of the media can be clearly confirmed. This can be especially noted as, advancing in time, the media coverage of the catastrophe became diversified. Because of differences in attitudes, expertise, dedication and possible political motivations, various media outlets constructed differing narratives and parallel realities of the reconstruction needs, plans and activities. These parallel realities continue to prevail and influence the personal representation of the red sludge catastrophe.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Gabor Sarlos is a PhD student at the School of Sociology of ELTE University in Budapest, researching social discourse on nuclear energy. He is the founder and managing partner of PeppeR Communications, a Hungarian PR consultancy. He is a regular trainer in media relations, personal communication skills, personal branding, crisis, and change management. He is also a part-time lecturer in Public Relations at the International Business School in Budapest. He is a graduate of the Corvinus University of Economics and holds a Graduate Certificate of Business Studies from Swinburne University, Melbourne, Australia.

Dr. Gyorgy Szondi is a lecturer in Corporate Communication at Bournemouth University, UK. He has been a lecturer at several universities across Europe, including the UK, Austria, Hungary, Poland, and Estonia. He holds a PhD from the University of Salzburg, Austria and an MS in Public Relations from the University of Stirling, UK. His interest and publications include international public relations, public diplomacy, nation branding, and risk and crises communication. He has designed and led communication training courses for the School of Government in the UK; the Government of Estonia, the Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs, and public diplomacy workshops for the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the European Union's European External Action Service in Brussels. Prior to academia, he worked for Hill and Knowlton, the international PR consultancy in Budapest, Hungary, and in its international headquarters in London.

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