

LIVING THROUGH THE CRISIS

Exploring a victim-oriented approach to crisis communication theory

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1. ABSTRACT

Crisis communication research has primarily focused on reducing reputational harm for an organisation in crisis. Consequently, current crisis communication theory is mainly sender-oriented. However, the company is not the only entity that is affected by a crisis. So far, the perspective of the impacted public has received very little attention in crisis communication research. In order to shed a light on this 'forgotten stakeholder', twenty-seven in-depth interviews were carried out with members of the community of Zwijndrecht who had been confronted with the PFOS-scandal. Due to production processes involving the PFOS-substance, the soil and groundwater surrounding the chemical plant, 3M, became polluted. The interviews allowed to explore if and how 3M communicated with local residents and what their specific communication needs are. The findings of this study indicate that local residents expect a timely, informative response that helps them deal with the situation. Additionally, these stakeholders not only want to be informed, but also listened to by the affected company. (160 words)

2. INTRODUCTION

A crisis can be defined as a sudden and unpredictable event (Coombs 2004; Seeger, 2006). Past crisis communication research has generated a set of theoretical guidelines that describe how an organisation should communicate during a crisis (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). In general, organisations are advised to provide instructing and adjusting information to the public (Sturges, 1994), to accept the amount of responsibility that is being attributed to them (Coombs, 2007) and to react to a crisis in a timely manner (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). Most of this research approaches crisis communication from a sender-perspective: i.e. the organisation. The primary aim is to reduce reputational damage for that organisation (Kim et al., 2011). It is even suggested that organisations can benefit from crisis situations (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000). Often, the stakeholders are viewed as “means to an end”, rather than as “the end itself” (Xu & Li, 2013, p. 382). However, crises have negative consequences for multiple parties involved (Coombs, 2015a). Different stakeholders experience varying levels of impact from the crisis (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000). Therefore, a shift was initiated in recent research to a more receiver-based approach (Coombs & Holladay, 2014).

Within receiver-oriented crisis communication research, the most attention has gone to the broad public, the customers and the media (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Apart from external publics, research has also considered internal publics, such as employees (Johansen et al., 2012). However, the perspective of the victims, those who suffer directly from the crisis (Coombs, 2015a) has rarely been adopted in prior research. Ulmer and Sellnow (2000) propose that more research is needed to explore how crisis communication strategies affect the many stakeholders of a crisis. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore crisis communication theory from the perspective of the impacted public. The PFOS crisis in Belgium offered a good opportunity to explore how stakeholders, who are directly affected by a corporate crisis, deal with such events and what their communication needs are exactly. Through in-depth interviews, the local residents who live in the vicinity of the 3M plant in Zwijndrecht were asked about their experiences with the PFOS crisis and their view of ideal crisis communication. Firstly, an overview of existent crisis communication theory is provided, possible reasons for the gap between theory and practice are explored and the branch of receiver-oriented crisis communication research is outlined. Then the results from the in-depth interviews are discussed. This work concludes by outlining some theoretical and practical implications.

3. CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY

3.1. Introduction to crises

A crisis is a sudden event that disrupts the activities of an organisation (Coombs, 2004; 2007). It is inherently dynamic and unpredictable (Seeger, 2006). While a crisis is unpredictable by definition, it is not unexpected (Coombs, 2015a; Coombs & Holladay, 2005). A wise organisation can anticipate crises. Managers should always bear in mind that a crisis can emerge. A food producer, for example, should prepare to one day be faced with a contamination and be forced to issue a recall. This however, does not affect the predictability of a crisis. An organisation has no grasp on exactly when, how or to what extent a crisis will befall the organisation (Coombs, 2015a).

According to Benoit (1997), a crisis consists of an offensive event for which an organisation is deemed responsible. Coombs (2007) on the other hand, refutes the importance of responsibility to constitute a crisis. In his view, it is sufficient that an unexpected situation is negatively perceived by the public and has negative consequences. These negative consequences can affect inter alia stakeholders. Stakeholders are people, groups, communities or organisations who have an influence on, are influenced by or feel involved with an organisation. Examples of stakeholders are: employees, suppliers, customers and the media (Ndlela, 2019). A crisis can affect stakeholders physically, emotionally and financially (Coombs, 2007).

Additionally, a crisis is also a threat for the company involved and its reputation (Coombs, 2007). An organisational reputation can be defined as the degree to which organisational responses meet the demands and expectations of stakeholders (Wartick, 1992). It is shaped by the information that the public receives about the organisation through various sources (Butler, 2021). When stakeholders feel that their expectations have been violated, they begin to associate negative feelings with the company. Therefore, the organisational reputation may be damaged (Coombs, 2007; Coombs, 2015a).

A crisis comprises multiple stages, in which different forms of communication are required (Sturges, 1994). Various models with a varying number of stages have been developed to structure the crisis management process (Coombs, 2015a). Darling (1994), for example, distinguished between four

phases in every crisis: the *prodromal* or warning stage, the *acute crisis* stage, the *chronic* crisis stage or clean-up and the *crisis resolution* stage. Reynolds and Seeger (2005), on the other hand, proposed a five-stage model. These five stages included: *precrisis*, *initial event*, *maintenance*, *resolution* and *evaluation*. However, the most popular model of crisis stages is the *three-stage model*. That classification differentiates between three different stages in every crisis: the *precrisis*, the *crisis event* and the *postcrisis* (Coombs, 2015a). During the period leading up to the crisis (*precrisis*), a company attempts to prevent a possible crisis from happening and to prepare for one. The *crisis event* starts with a trigger and ends when the issue seems to be resolved. During this time, communication with stakeholders is crucial. Lastly there is the stage after the crisis (*postcrisis*) in which a company evaluates the crisis situation and controls the aftermath (Coombs, 2015a; Coombs & Holladay, 2010). In general, these models prove that effective crisis communication begins long before the crisis and continues long after the initial threat subsides (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005).

Apart from different crisis stages, multiple crisis types have also been distinguished. Determining the crisis type is necessary to define the requirements for effective crisis communication (Seeger, 2006). Coombs (2007) discerned three overarching clusters, determined by the level of perceived responsibility: the *victim cluster*, the *accidental cluster* and the *intentional or preventable cluster*. In the *victim cluster*, the organisation is deemed a victim and thus not responsible for the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Examples of crises that are part of this cluster are: rumours, natural disasters, workplace violence and product tampering (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). In the *accidental cluster*, the event is seen as unintentional or uncontrollable. Consequently, the organisation is viewed as only partly responsible (Coombs, 2007). The *accidental cluster* comprises challenges, megadamage, technical breakdown-accidents and technical breakdown-recalls (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). In the event of an *intentional or preventable* crisis, the organisation is deemed responsible for a purposeful event (Coombs, 2007). The intentional cluster includes human breakdown accidents, human breakdown recalls, organisational misdeeds, management misconduct and organisational misdeeds with or without injuries (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). In reality, a crisis can contain elements from multiple crisis types, which means the crisis types can overlap (Coombs, 2015b).

The type of crisis has an impact on the amount of responsibility the public attributes to the organisation. Generally, the more responsibility a company is being attributed, the more possible reputational threat it faces (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Apart from crisis type, other reinforcing

factors can affect the perceived responsibility of a company, such as the *pre-crisis reputation* and the *crisis history* (Coombs & Holladay, 2001; Fennis & Stroebe, 2014). *Pre-crisis reputation* refers to the relationship between an organisation and its stakeholders before a crisis situation emerges. *Crisis history* indicates whether the crisis is an isolated case or whether it is part of a larger pattern of similar crises in the organisation's history. Both factors affect the way stakeholders perceive a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). When a company holds a positive pre-crisis reputation and crisis history, the crisis is less likely to generate a large amount of reputational damage. If, however, the company holds a negative pre-crisis reputation and crisis history, the crisis will have more negative implications for the perceived trustworthiness of the company (Fennis & Stroebe, 2014) and the organisational reputation (Coombs, 2004). In addition, the severity of the crisis can also be an attributing factor (Claeys et al., 2010; Coombs, 2004). The more harm a crisis entails, the more responsibility the public will ascribe the organisation (Coombs, 2004).

3.2. Introduction to crisis communication

Crisis management can be defined as “a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damage inflicted” (Coombs, 2015a, p. 21). It is a process that consists of different elements: preventative measures, crisis management plans and post-crisis evaluations (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Crisis communication is a crucial component of crisis management and is generally seen as collecting, processing and distributing information that is required to handle a crisis situation (Coombs & Holladay, 2010).

Within crisis communication, two general strategies can be distinguished: *managing information* and *managing meaning*. *Managing information* is an approach that focusses on collecting and distributing information about the crisis. *Managing meaning*, on the other hand, deals with reputational repair (Coombs, 2015a). During a crisis, stress is created by the uncertainty and potential harm of the situation (Coombs, 2015a). Stakeholders have an intensified risk and perceive their safety to be threatened (Sellnow et al., 2017). They need to know when and how the crisis might affect them so they can protect themselves (Coomb, 2015a; Sellnow et al., 2017). An important aim of crisis communication is therefore: informing the public (Seeger, 2006). Thus,

managing information should take priority (Claeys et al. 2021), especially during the initial stages of the crisis (Sturges, 1994).

Managing information covers two types of information: *instructing information* and *adjusting information* (Sturges, 1994). *Instructing information* contains information about how the interested parties can protect themselves physically from possible harmful consequences of the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Examples include the use of face masks and social distancing guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic. It gives the impression that the company is in control of the crisis situation (Coombs, 2015a). *Adjusting information* aims to help the public handle the crisis mentally. The affected company should reduce the amount of stress and insecurity that a crisis triggers for the stakeholders. According to Coombs (2007), a company can tackle this in three ways: by explaining what happened, by expressing empathy and by explaining how the company will prevent a similar crisis in the future (*corrective action*). Even though the two types of information are often discussed separately, they both provide information to contextualise the crisis, reduce uncertainty and reassure stakeholders (Holladay, 2009). The combination of instructing and adjusting information is also referred to as: ‘the ethical base response’ (Claeys & Coombs, 2020) and is seen as the foundation of any crisis communication (Coombs, 2015a).

A great deal of research has been carried out to discover the best design for instructional messages (Sellnow et al., 2012). Sellnow et al. (2015) proposed that ideal instructional messages should not only be informative, but also motivate the receivers to act appropriately. Multiple sources implement the *IDEA model* for increasing the effectiveness of instructional communication (Sellnow et al., 2012; Sellnow et al., 2015). IDEA stands for *internalisation, distribution, explanation and action* (Sellnow et al., 2017). Additionally, instructional messages are proven to be more effective when tailored to a specific target group. Companies are advised to take into consideration the learning style preference, gender and group type of the intended audience (Sellnow et al., 2012). However, tailoring messages can be time-consuming and unrealistic during a crisis event (Sellnow et al., 2015). In any case, instructional messages that are constructed following the IDEA model are more effective and result in more self-protective behaviour from the public (Sellnow et al., 2017).

Only when all of the involved parties have been informed correctly, a company can attempt to use its communication to minimise possible reputational damage (Coombs, 2007; Sturges, 1994). This

is referred to as: *managing meaning*. Communication following this approach focusses on how people perceive the crisis or the affected company (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). This corresponds with Sturges' (1994) concept of *internalising information*. *Internalising information* aims to adjust the image that people have of a company in crisis to help that company manage its reputation (Holladay, 2009; Sturges, 1994).

3.3. Introduction to crisis communication strategies

Managing meaning is, therefore, an approach that allows a company in crisis to restore its reputation (Coombs, 2015a). The goal for organisations is to limit the amount of reputational damage, reduce the negative consequences and positively affect buyer intentions. This can be achieved through multiple crisis communication strategies (Coombs, 2007). Reputation repair has dominated in crisis communication research (Kim et al., 2011). Within crisis communication, diverse aspects have been explored, such as crisis response strategies and crisis timing strategies. The following sections of the literature review will discuss these strategies in further detail.

3.3.1. Crisis response strategies

A first aspect that has received considerable attention in crisis communication is the content of the message: what should an organisation say while dealing with a crisis? Multiple theories have been defined to tackle the content of crisis communication. In this section, these theories on crisis communication content will be examined.

Within the field of crisis communication, Benoit (1997) developed a first influential theory: the *Image Repair Theory (IRT)*. The theory is centred around the premise that the perception of responsibility is more important than the actual responsibility of a company. If an organisation is deemed responsible, then its reputation is at risk and the company should react. Based on descriptive research, the theory derives five broad categories of repair strategies: *denial*, *evasion of responsibility*, *reduce offensiveness*, *corrective action* and *mortification*. A *denial* strategy entails that a company denies any involvement with the crisis and attempts to shift the blame. *Evasion of*

responsibility implies that an organisation will try to avoid responsibility for the crisis by citing external factors, such as a lack of information. The company can also try to convince the public of their good intentions. *Reduce offensiveness* means that the company will attempt to downplay the severity of the crisis. This can be achieved by reinforcing the reputation of the company (*bolstering*), by placing the crisis in a more positive context (*differentiation*) or by providing some form of *compensation*. A company can opt for a *corrective action* by focussing on solving the crisis or preventing a similar event in the future. Lastly, *mortification* means that a company admits its responsibility and asks for forgiveness (Benoit, 1997).

However, the *IRT* by Benoit (1997) is merely a descriptive theory. Benoit did not provide any insight into the suitability of those strategies for different crisis situations. Contrary to Benoit (1997), Coombs (2007) proposes his *Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)* in which he does consider the adequacy of the repair strategies for distinct situations. Coombs (2007) built his SCCT on the *Attribution Theory* from Weiner (1985). In his work, Weiner (1985) describes the natural inclination of people to search for an explanation or a responsible for an event. That explanation allows them to handle the situation better. "Once a cause, or causes, are assigned, effective management may be possible and a prescription or guide for future action can be suggested" (Weiner, 1985, p. 548). Similarly, during a crisis event, people also seek a responsible party. The SCCT specifies that, the more responsibility a company is being attributed, the more accommodative the crisis response strategy should be (Claeys & Coombs, 2020).

Multiple crisis response strategies can be distinguished according to the amount of responsibility that a company accepts. Coombs (2007) describes three overarching clusters, each containing various response strategies: *deny*, *diminish* and *rebuild*. The *deny* strategies refute the crisis or the responsibility that the company is being ascribed. Denial has received ample attention in crisis communication research. In some cases, the strategy is regarded as more effective than accommodating strategies (Kim & Sung, 2014). Coombs et al. (2016), however, stress the importance of responsibility attributions. According to them, denial is only effective when an organisation is innocent. Irrespective of its effectiveness, Kim et al. (2009) discover that, in practice, denial is the most frequently implemented strategy. Secondly, the *diminish* strategies aim to reduce the severity of the crisis or the responsibility of the company. To achieve this, a company can implement an *excuse* or a *justification* strategy (Coombs, 2006). With an excuse strategy, the crisis

manager will claim that the company had no intent of harm or no control over the situation. A justification strategy attempts to minimise the severity of the crisis (Coombs, 2007). The *rebuild* strategies, finally, focus on restoring the reputation of the organisation by accepting responsibility for the crisis. Organisations can accomplish this by apologising or compensating potential victims.

One rebuild strategy specifically, *apology*, has received particular attention within crisis communication literature and is often encouraged. *Apologies* can help organisations prevent or reduce reputational damage following a crisis (Janssen & Gerards, 2016). It is a strongly accommodative strategy that is mainly concerned with the victims (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Sincere apologies contain at least a certain form of accountability, an expression of regret and an implicit or explicit promise to prevent the recurrence of the offensive event (Bentley, 2015). Previous experimental research recommends the use of apologies (Coombs & Holladay, 2008), because they can create the perception that the company is focused on solving the crisis instead of avoiding responsibility (Xie & Peng, 2009). In practice, apologies are common. However, oftentimes organisations turn to pseudo-apologies, in an attempt to avoid legal liability (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). *Pseudo-apologies* are linguistic acts that include certain expressions such as ‘I am sorry’ or ‘I apologise’ but that are not sincere (Bentley, 2015). With a pseudo-apology, a company will apologise without actually taking responsibility for what transpired (Myers, 2016). These types of apologies are added for reputational repair only (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016).

SCCT centres around the amount of responsibility that is being ascribed to a company. The theory posits that an organisation should accept the amount of responsibility that the crisis type requires. A suitable strategy should therefore match the possible reputational damage that is inherent to the crisis type. Thus, the *deny* strategies should be used for the *victim cluster*, the *diminish* strategies for the *accidental cluster* and the *rebuild* strategies for the *preventable cluster* (Coombs, 2006; Coombs, 2007). A clear overview of the crisis type clusters and their corresponding crisis response strategies according to the SCCT can be found in table 1.

Table 1:

Overview of the crisis type clusters with matching crisis response strategies based on SCCT

Amount of perceived responsibility	Crisis type clusters	Crisis response strategy clusters	Crisis response strategies
Limited	Victim cluster	Deny cluster	Simple deny strategy Attack the accuser Scapegoating
Moderate	Accidental cluster	Diminish cluster	Excuse Victimisation Justification
High	Preventable cluster	Rebuild cluster	Integration Corrective action Apology

Note. Adapted from “The protective powers of crisis response strategies: Managing reputational assets during a crisis.” By Coombs, W. T., 2006, *Journal of Promotion Management*, 12(3-4), p. 248. Copyright 2006 by Coombs, W.T.

Apart from the previously defined crisis response strategies as outlined by Benoit (1997) and Coombs (2007), there are other tactics a company can adopt in its crisis communication as well, such as *stonewalling*. Stonewalling means that a company explicitly chooses not to respond to a crisis. Given that stonewalling is passive in nature, the most important theories do not consider it a strategy (Le et al, 2019). In general, companies are advised against stonewalling (Le et al, 2019), since it makes the company appear insecure and not in control of the situation (Coombs, 2015a). In practice, however, companies do sometimes decide to stay quiet: e.g. when responding may result in legal consequences or when insufficient information is available (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). Research shows that the strategic use of stonewalling may in some instances entail positive effects. For example when it is used to buy time for a crisis investigation, before developing a more comprehensive crisis communication (Le et al, 2019). In any case, crisis managers should make informed decisions about which crisis response strategies to implement (Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

3.3.2. Crisis timing strategies

Apart from crisis response strategies, crisis timing strategies have also been examined thoroughly. A company can manage its reputation actively, both through the content of its crisis communication and the timing (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). In general, two crisis timing strategies can be distinguished: *stealing thunder* and *thunder*. *Stealing thunder* is a timing strategy in which an organisation releases information about the crisis, before the media or other concerned parties discover the crisis situation (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). The company attempts to disclose the crisis first to affect the nature of the information stream (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). With a *thunder* strategy, a company will not expose the crisis itself, but rather wait until the media or a different party starts asking questions to which the company can respond (Claeys et al., 2013).

Speed is essential for effective crisis communication (Coombs, 2015a). The benefits of a quick response largely outweigh the potential risks: e.g. inaccuracy. Still, the affected company needs enough time to collect and process the relevant crisis information (Coombs, 2015a). Prior crisis communication research encourages the implementation of a *stealing thunder* strategy (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016), since it positively impacts the evaluation of the company (Fennis & Stroebe, 2014), the perception of credibility (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Fennis & Stroebe, 2014) and the future purchase intention of stakeholders (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Fennis & Stroebe, 2014). The strategy also makes a crisis seem less severe (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005) and does not provoke more attention from journalists than a *thunder* strategy (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). Additionally, by framing the crisis appropriately, a better restored reputation is ensured (Claeys, Cauberghe & Leysen, 2013).

Several researchers have examined the impact of timing strategies under different circumstances. Claeys and Cauberghe (2012), for example, assessed whether the use of a timing strategy impacts the need for a crisis response strategy. They found that the implementation of a suitable crisis response strategy becomes more crucial when an organisation fails to steal thunder (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). Fennis and Stroebe (2014) looked at the relation between a timing strategy and the prior reputation of the affected company. They noticed that stealing thunder is specifically advisable for companies with a negative or neutral prior reputation. In sum, “organizations clearly benefit from communicating openly and self-disclosing a crisis” (Claeys et al., 2013, p. 305).

4. CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN PRACTICE

Past research in crisis communication has yielded evidence-based guidelines that describe how an organisation should communicate during a crisis. Those guidelines have been thoroughly examined through experimental studies (Claeys & Coombs, 2020). Hence, organisations have access to clear evidence-based directives to manage their crisis communication (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). As such, companies are encouraged to inform people with an ethical base response (Coombs, 2015a), to accept responsibility when they are deemed responsible (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007) and to self-disclose a crisis whenever they can (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005).

Nevertheless, organisations in crisis still struggle to implement crisis communication theory in practice (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2021). As such, “a gap exists between theoretical guidelines and crisis communication practice” (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016, p. 1). Apart from possible reputational consequences, organisations can also face financial and legal challenges (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2021; Coombs, 2015b). This results in organisations opting for suboptimal approaches rather than the recommendations from crisis communication literature (Claeys & Coombs, 2020). In the chapter below, potential reasons for the gap between theory and practice in crisis communication are explored.

4.1. Financial and legal objections

Firstly, financial and legal consequences may complicate the practical application of crisis communication theory (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). Since crises are often tragic and have negative consequences for multiple parties involved (Coombs, 2015a), litigation commonly follows (Kaufmann et al., 1994). Choosing the optimal, recommended strategies, such as assuming responsibility and self-disclosing a crisis, could lead to legal ramifications (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). Similarly, financial consequences may also influence the companies response (Coombs, 2015a). For example, a full disclosure strategy may result in a significant amount of direct and indirect costs. Direct costs can include payments following court losses, out-of-court settlements

and attorneys' fees, while indirect costs have to do with negative publicity and reputational harm (Kaufmann et al., 1994).

In order to limit liability in their crisis responses, organisations end up choosing suboptimal strategies to limit immediate harm, instead of leaning towards the optimal strategy for long-term benefit (Claeys & Coombs, 2020). Descriptive crisis communication research has confirmed that the best practices of crisis communication research are not adopted in practice. Kim et al. (2009), for example, notice that denial and bolstering are the most frequently implemented strategies, even though they are deemed the least effective by crisis scholars. This proves that, in practice, legal strategy often dominates the public relations strategy (Fitzpatrick & Rubin, 1995).

Fitzpatrick and Rubin (1995) make a clear distinction between a *traditional public relations strategy* and a *traditional legal strategy*. While the public relations department will recommend an open policy to win the public's forgiveness, most legal departments will attempt to evade organisational liability for the crisis (Coombs et al., 2016). A traditional public relations strategy could for example include admitting that a problem exists, announcing an investigation into the problem and taking corrective measures. A traditional legal strategy will encourage not reacting, denying guilt or shifting blame (Fitzpatrick & Rubin, 1995).

This dichotomy between public relations and legal expertise is also found by qualitative research. In-depth interviews with legal advisors and CEOs show that, even though the input of PR-experts is considered significant, most crisis response messages are rewritten out of fear for possible legal consequences (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2021). However, this legal dominance is short-sighted and costly, since it can lead to increased lawsuits and diminished public image (Fitzpatrick & Rubin, 1995). Therefore, it is crucial that companies weigh the benefits and costs of all disclosure strategies (Kaufmann et al., 1994).

4.2. Decision making during ongoing crises

Secondly, decision making in times of crises differs significantly from decision making in normal circumstances (van der Meer et al., 2017). Several situational and personal factors may influence

the decision making process of the crisis management team (Claeys & Coombs, 2020). Since a crisis is a sudden event that can surprise managers and employees (Coombs, 2004), a crisis management team (CMT) usually has very little time to respond (Claeys & Coombs, 2020). The impact of an objective time shortage is also called ‘time-stress’ and can affect the strategies that decision makers select (Ariely & Zakay, 2001). PR practitioners not only experience time pressure and uncertainty during a crisis, they are also faced with an information overload (Claeys & Coombs, 2020) and feel substantial pressure from external and internal stakeholders (van der Meer et al., 2017). Consequently, decision making can be impacted by basic decision-making rules, such as ‘loss aversion’. This is the tendency to fear a potential loss more than value the benefit of a potential gain (Higgins & Freedman, 2013). Another influencing factor is optimism bias, which implies that an organisation attributes more importance to the positive outcomes (Claeys & Coombs, 2020).

Due to these influential factors, communication practitioners rely more often on intuition rather than analytical thinking when making decisions in crisis times (Claeys & Coombs, 2020). As a result, CMTs often focus on avoiding short-term losses by lowering crisis responsibility, instead of targeting long-term gains, such as restoring the organisation-public relationship (Kim & Sung, 2014). These suboptimal responses can increase the risk of physical and financial damage for the stakeholders affected by the crisis and reputational damage for the organisation in the long run (Claeys & Coombs, 2020). Importantly, CMT members have to strategically weigh the advantages and disadvantages of both short and long-term goals for their crisis response selection (Kim & Sung, 2014).

5. AFFECTED PUBLIC PERSPECTIVE

After considering existent crisis communication theory and possible difficulties of putting that theory in practice, this literature review will cover the target audience of crisis communication. Most research has examined ideal crisis communication from the perspective of the sender: the company (Sellnow et al., 2015). Hence, crisis communication theory is dominated by the managerial perspective (Waymer & Heath, 2007). By contrast, relatively little attention has been given to the receiver (Sellnow et al., 2015): i.e. the target audience of the crisis response. However, according to Coombs (2015a), an essential part of crisis communication is the ability to see the situation from someone else's point of view. A phenomenon he calls 'perspective taking'. It is crucial that companies in crisis understand and sympathise with possible victims of the crisis (Coombs, 2015a). Therefore, crisis response strategies should give thought to the needs of the public (Holladay, 2009). More specifically, the perspective of the affected publics, those who are at the root of the organisational crisis, needs to be taken into account (Waymer & Heath, 2007). In that way, a more realistic line of crisis communication research can be triggered that is inclusive to all potentially affected publics (Butler, 2021).

Past research concerning the target audience of crisis communication has focused on a limited number of stakeholder groups. However, different stakeholders have very different stakes and perceptions. Therefore it is important to differentiate between them (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). The most attention has been given to the external publics of crisis communication, such as the broad public, customers and the media (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Since customers can influence an organisation both positively and negatively, they are considered to be primary stakeholders (Coombs, 2015a). During a crisis, the expectations of customers are violated, which makes them feel betrayed and react negatively to the organisation (Ma, 2018). This can make them less supportive or even cause them to cut ties with an organisation altogether (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). Moreover, that feeling of betrayal leads to negative attitudes, anger, negative word-of-mouth communication and a diminished purchase intention. It is therefore in the organisations' best interest to build a positive customer-company relationship, which may serve as a buffer during crisis situations (Ma, 2018).

Apart from external publics, crisis communication research has also considered internal stakeholders: i.e. the employees (Johansen et al., 2012). There are four elements that differentiate employees from other stakeholder groups: the organisation-employee relationship (OER), the stakes, the degree of identification with the organisation and the role of employees as senders and receivers of internal crisis communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011). Since a strong organisation-employee relationship (OER) has a positive impact on organisational resilience (Kim, 2020), employees are valuable assets to a company during a crisis (Kim, 2018). However, if organisations want their employees' support, they will have to provide transparent, two-way communication for them. That way, employees will be more likely to exhibit "employee communication behaviour" or ECB (Kim, 2018). By searching and forwarding positive information about their organisation (Kim, 2020), they can become organisational ambassadors for both internal and external stakeholders (Johansen et al., 2012).

Additionally, during a crisis, an entirely new group of stakeholders emerges: the victims (Coombs, 2007). "These are the people who have suffered physically, mentally, or financially from the crisis". Victims can include a wide variety of stakeholder groups, such as customers, employees and shareholders (Coombs, 2015a). Nevertheless, in most prior research, the perspective of victims is mostly overlooked. Even more, in crisis situations, the most affected stakeholders are oftentimes the most disadvantaged stakeholders on the agenda (Xu & Li, 2013). The very little research that has been carried out, indicates that the affective public expects a timely crisis response, in which the organisation discusses its role and its intended plan of action (Butler, 2021). But in most theories, stakeholders are merely treated as a means to a goal: i.e. minimizing the harm to the organisation (Xu & Li, 2013). This focus on reputational damage at the expense of the impacted public is deemed highly unethical (Butler, 2021). Therefore, an ethics of justice approach needs to be added to crisis communication research (Xu & Li, 2013).

As stated before, victims can include a vast array of different stakeholders. A specific type of victims are the local residents who live in the vicinity of a crisis event. During the Bhopal crisis, for example, a gas leak in a Union Carbide plant resulted in serious consequences for the local residents living near the factory. In the wake of the crisis, hundreds of thousands were affected by the incident, both short-term and long-term. The company, Union Carbide, refused to accept responsibility in order to avoid legal liability (Sen & Egelhoff, 1991). Consequently, people residing close to factories may

be affected by a crisis. This is also the case for the PFOS-crisis in Belgium. In Zwijndrecht, questions started emerging regarding a recently uncovered environmental pollution (Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, April 26b). Large quantities of a particular substance, called PFOS, ended up in the soil and groundwater of the municipality neighbouring the 3M plant (Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, June 2). This substance was used during the production processes of the multinational 3M (Sertyn, 2021, June 17). The local residents in Zwijndrecht, who live within close proximity of the factory, are worried about the possible consequences of the pollution on their health and their living environment. This current study aims to shed a light on the perspective of the impacted public, more specifically, the local residents of Zwijndrecht living within a 5 kilometre radius of the 3M plant. Accordingly, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1	Did 3M provide communication to the local residents? If so, in what way?
RQ2	What did the local residents living in the vicinity of the 3M plant think about 3M's crisis communication?
RQ3	What does the affected public find to be ideal crisis communication?

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1. Overview PFOS-scandal 3M Belgium

The Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company was founded in 1902 and later renamed 3M. The company's headquarter is located in the American state of Minnesota (Sertyn, 2021, June 17). Anno 2021-2022, 3M is a multinational that produces a wide range of products: from synthetic rubber for the automotive industry and liquids for the electronics sector, to different types of glue, face masks and post-its (Sertyn, 2021, June 17). In its production process, 3M operates with a substance called PFOS. Perfluorooctane sulfonic acid or PFOS is a chemical substance that hardly degrades (Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, June 2). It falls within the larger group of PFAS, the so-called 'forever chemicals' (Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, April 26b). It is often used in products in order to make them water and dirt repellent (Poppelmonde & Winckelmans, 2021, June 18b). The substance accumulates in the body and can be linked to possible health risks, such as a hormone imbalance, an increased chance of cancer and a weakened immune system (Poppelmonde & Winckelmans, 2021, June 18b).

In 2000, the production of chemical PFOS links was halted overnight. Officially because the substance cannot or can hardly be degraded (Poppelmonde & Winckelmans, 2021, June 18b). However, since 3M used PFOS during its production process, large quantities from the chemical substance ended up in the soil and groundwater (Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, June 2). Questions started emerging recently regarding soil contamination due to excavations works close to Zwijndrecht around May of 2021 (Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, April 26b). The excavations were connected to the Oosterweel works in Antwerp managed by Lantis, previously named BAM (Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, June 2). At the time, different samples were taken from the soil and groundwater around the 3M factory. All of those tests exceeded the soil sanitation standards (Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, June 2). Additionally, blood tests among the inhabitants of Zwijndrecht showed that 9 out of 10 participants had too much PFAS in their blood. Thus, more blood tests were issued that included people within a 5 km radius of the 3M plant (Papy, 2021, October 29). Meanwhile, the authorities announced a set of 'no regret'-measures designed for people living within a 15km radius of the 3M plant to limit their exposure to PFOS. The local residents were

advised not to consume eggs from their own chickens and to avoid homegrown fruit and vegetables (No regret-maatregelen Zwijndrecht, n.d.).

In June 2021, a parliamentary committee of inquiry was initiated to investigate the matter (Poppelmonde & Winckelmans, 2021, June 18a). The goal of this committee was to determine who is responsible for the pollution. If 3M was deemed responsible, it would be held accountable for the clean-up of the contamination in and around Zwijndrecht. During the parliamentary investigation, multiple sessions were organised to consult experts, local residents and farmers, in an attempt to assess the PFOS-crisis (Onderzoekscommissie PFOS, 2021, June 25). For a more extensive overview of the crisis events, a comprehensive timeline is added in annex 13.1.

3M commented on the PFOS crisis for the first time in a press release on 29 June 2021. The company stated that they were serious about their responsibility towards employees, customers and the community. Moreover, 3M maintained that they continuously invest in a more responsible production and in improved groundwater (Rvs, 2021, June 29). Apart from this press release, 3M was also summoned to the committee of inquiry. During these few televised appearances, the company insisted that no consistent causal link could be proven between PFOS and health risks (De Bode, 2021, December 4; Poppelmonde, 2021, June 30). Difficult questions were often evaded by stating that the managers were not experts in soil sanitation or environmental engineers (Vanhecke, 2021, September 4). 3M also attempted to appease the public by stating that their employees had far higher values, yet were completely healthy (Rvs, 2021, June 29). Lastly, the European director of 3M, Peter Vermeulen, gave an interview in which those same key messages were underlined: “progressive insight”, “no causal link” and “no need for panic” (Poppelmonde & Cools, July 3). Multiple sources noted that 3M was very careful in the formulation of its statements. For instance, in the press release, 3M implemented the word ‘improve’ instead of ‘remediate’ (Lefevere & Calluy, 2021, June 29; Walker, 2021, June 29).

6.2. Procedure

Since very little research has addressed the affected public perspective on crisis communication, this subject is relatively new. In order to get a detailed picture of the affected public's thoughts and behaviours, a qualitative, inductive approach was implemented (Boyce & Neale, 2006). A qualitative research method allows for interpretation and meaning (Galvin, 2015). More specifically, in order to discover the information needs of the affected public and their perceptions of 3M's crisis communication, in-depth interviews were conducted.

The participants were contacted through a combination of random and non-random sampling. In a first phase, 100 invitation letters were inserted in the letterboxes of inhabitants of Zwijndrecht within a radius of 5 kilometres of the 3M factory. The invitation letters explained the aim of the study and contained an invitation to participate (cf. Appendix 13.2). Firstly, some of the main streets within that radius were handpicked via Google Maps. The houses were selected using a random selection procedure (Robinson, 2014). Using a randomiser application, a number between one and ten was picked. That number was four. On 4 January, the letters were delivered by hand at every house that was located 4 house numbers apart. Per street, a maximum of 10 letters were delivered, in order to disperse the respondents as much as possible within the five kilometres radius. From those 100 letters, five people made contact to indicate their willingness to participate in an interview.

On 25 January, this process was then repeated with another 100 letters. For the second round of invitation letters, the same selection process was implemented. Ten other streets within a five kilometres radius from the factory were selected using Google Maps. Every four houses, an invitation letter was hand delivered. From that second round, an additional four inhabitants reached out to participate in the study. Thus, in total, nine responses were obtained from those 200 letters.

In a second phase, snowball sampling was implemented to increase the number of participants. Snowball sampling comes with a number of risks: the results might lack external validity, generalisability and representativeness (Parker, Scott & Geddes, 2019). To account for those risks, the respondents were systematically asked to appoint a maximum of two other acquaintances that might be interested in being interviewed. This way, additional participants were reached, but an all too strong connection between the group of interviewees was avoided.

Before the interview, each participant was asked to sign an informed consent form (cf. appendix 13.3). The form offered general information about the topic and course of the interview. Potential participants were told that the interview would take no longer than an hour and that it would be recorded. They were also informed about the treatment of their data, privacy protection and ensured anonymity. All interviewees consented to being interviewed and having their interview incorporated anonymously in research. None of the interviewees asserted their right to revoke their data, therefore, all 27 interviews were included in this thesis.

The interviews were semi-structured and followed a predetermined topic list. At the start of each interview, the respondents were asked a series of light-hearted questions in order to reassure them. These questions concerned mostly their living arrangements and personal experiences in Zwijndrecht. Afterwards, the participants were asked about the PFOS crisis and 3M's crisis communication. These questions were open-ended in an attempt to gather as much information as possible. When an answer was slightly one-sided, the participants were encouraged to think of any and everything worth mentioning. The topic list is added in annex for reference (see annex 13.4).

All of the interviews were recorded using a phone application, before being transcribed verbatim in Dutch. A thematic analysis was used to compare the various interviews and discover recurring themes (Green & Thorogood, 2004). For example, the participants expressed differing views concerning damage they suffered from the crisis. Within the theme of "perceived damage" three subcategories were identified: financial damage, material damage and mental harm. All of these topics were then discussed in the result section. Afterwards, quotes were selected to illustrate the results of the thematic analysis. These quotes were translated into English. The analysis was later transformed into the result section below.

6.3. Participants

In total, 31 inhabitants were reached. Many scientific literature has been dedicated to the number of interviews necessary to reach saturation. Green and Thorogood (2004) claim that interviews should

be resumed until nothing new is being generated. Galvin (2015) wrote that saturation is reached largely after 12 interviews and definitely after 30. According to Charmaz (2006) 25 respondents is optimal for smaller sized projects. After around twenty-five interviews, many of the same themes continued surfacing. The thirty-first interview concluded the sample since saturation was most likely achieved.

A total of 27 in-depth interviews were carried out among 31 inhabitants of Zwijndrecht in February and March of 2022. Seeing as some people expressed a desire to take the interview together, some interviews included multiple participants. In sum, three interviews were conducted with two participants and one interview was taken from three participants. Due to the circumstances concerning the coronavirus and health and safety measures, the respondents were given the choice to conduct the interview online or face-to-face. 6 interviews were conducted online through Microsoft Teams and 21 interviews were conducted face-to-face in Zwijndrecht. The average interview lasted 30 minutes, ranging from 12 minutes to 1 hour 32 minutes.

Out of the 31 respondents, 19 were men and 12 were women. On average, a respondent was 61 years old, the ages ranging from 40 to 78 years old. All respondents resided within a radius of five kilometres from the 3M plant. For all interviewees, the distance between their residence and the 3M factory was determined through an online distance calculator: <https://nl.distance.to/> . The average distance to the 3M factory was 2,02 kilometres. The closest respondent lived 1,08 kilometres away and the furthest one 3,85. Table 2 gives a complete overview of all the interviews and respondents.

Table 2:

Overview of the respondents and interviews conducted

Respondent	Gender	Age	Distance to 3M factory	Interviewed	Duration of interview
1	Male	61	2,28 km	16-02-2022	35:29
2	Male	58	1,99 km	18-02-2022	23:01
3	Female	61	2,11 km	18-02-2022	16:56
4	Male	78	1,29 km	18-02-2022	34:44
5	Female	75		18-02-2022	11:56
6	Male	63	1,43 km	18-02-2022	25:10
7	Male	72	1,79 km	19-02-2022	38:40
8	Female	57	1,12 km	19-02-2022	18:54
9	Male	45	2,08 km	19-02-2022	23:45
10	Male	76	1,57 km	19-02-2022	40:16
11	Male	60	2,34 km	25-02-2022	27:11
12	Female	58			
13	Male	68	3,42 km	25-02-2022	31:03
14	Male	65	1,55 km	25-02-2022	37:04
15	Female	61			
16	Male	62	1,53 km		
17	Female	59	1,52 km	25-02-2022	26:38
18	Female	56	1,50 km	25-02-2022	16:36

19	Female	61	2,23 km	25-02-2022	18:33
20	Male	54	1,54 km	02-03-2022	18:35
21	Male	61	1,91 km	04-03-2022	23:38
22	Male	57	3,85 km	04-03-2022	17:04
23	Male	75	2,22 km	05-03-2022	16:42
24	Female	72			
25	Male	65	2,33 km	05-03-2022	35:29
26	Female	69	3,53 km	05-03-2022	18:14
27	Female	50	3,03 km	08-03-2022	26:41
28	Male	52		08-03-2022	38:44
29	Male	44	1,87 km	28-03-2022	01:08:26
30a*	Male	46	1,08 km	28-02-2022	45:37
30b*				21-03-2022	01:32:03
31					

* The a-b respondent was interviewed twice. During the first interview, he indicated that he was part of an action group that would be meeting with 3M soon after the initial in-depth interview. Because this could provide us with interesting new information regarding 3M's communication about the crisis, we scheduled a second interview.

7. RESULTS

The result section will be divided into three different subsections to separate the findings based on general topic. Firstly, the personal experiences of the inhabitants with the PFOS-crisis will be discussed. Secondly, the participants' perspective of 3M's crisis communication will be analysed. Finally, the affected public gave an insight into what ideal crisis communication in the context of this crisis would look like to them.

7.1. Personal experiences with the PFOS-crisis

7.1.1. Residential context

During the interviews, the participants were asked about their experiences with the PFOS-crisis. Most of the participants have been living in Zwijndrecht for a long time, averaging at around 40 years. The participants' periods of residence varied between 15 and 76 years. Since the PFOS pollution dates back to 2002, some of the inhabitants have been exposed to the chemical for their entire lives. "Actually, when looking back now, the production of PFOS started about at the same time that we moved here. The production continued for about 20 years, without our knowledge. Then they quit. Another 20 years later, the issue was discovered." (respondent 23).

The interviewees claim to have moved to Zwijndrecht in search of a calm, healthy environment. Respondent 1 explains: "I moved to Zwijndrecht because of the green appearance that it had and still has." It is hard for them to reconcile the green image of their city with the pollution of the crisis at hand.

"You move here because you can live in nature. You get the feeling that it is healthy here because there is still a great number of trees. Afterwards, you realise that all of your land is polluted. You raise chickens and grow vegetables, thinking that you are living a healthy lifestyle and, in the end, you made yourself ill." (respondent 19).

Overall, the respondents had mixed feelings about the PFOS-pollution. Some people felt upset: “What will happen in the future? That is something that you can’t predict. It definitely weighs on me mentally.” (respondent 20). Other people felt frustrated. Many of the respondents were left worrying about the possible consequences of the pollution. “To what extent will it impact my health or my children’s health in the future? My children have always lived here. What about my grandchildren and the people that live here in the neighbourhood? Yes, I do worry about that.” (respondent 3).

Remarkably, however, about one in three respondents indicated that they cannot help but feel indifferent for the time being. Since a clear link with health implications has not been established yet and some of the respondents do not experience any consequences themselves, they find it hard to feel a certain way about the pollution.

“We have never really noticed it. Of course not. I think no one did. Now we are being warned for possible consequences. We try to put things into perspective, in the sense that there hasn’t been a definite link established, like there is for asbestos.” (respondent 4).

“It is a chemical that accumulates in the body. It cannot be broken down. It may cause harm, ‘may’... Similarly, walking in the sun for too long, smoking too much, drinking heavily, those things can all cause damage as well.” (respondent 28).

7.1.2. Perceived damage

It is important to find out whether or not the inhabitants of Zwijndrecht feel that they have suffered damage from the crisis. Their perceived effect may have an influence on their perceptions of 3M’s crisis communication and their expectations regarding the company’s response. When the respondents were asked the damages they experienced, they indicated a wide array of possible consequences. About half of the interviewees stated that they were notably affected by the crisis. The consequences that were mentioned related mostly to financial damage, material damage and mental harm.

For some, the perceived damage was mostly material. Respondent 8, for example, was worried about future renovations: “We are planning to build a new terrace and are unsure what to do with the sand.

So we definitely suffer material damage to a certain extent.” Some respondents spontaneously mentioned a possible influence on the value of their house, others confirmed a potential impact when they were asked about it during the interview. Many of them fear that the PFOS-crisis will have a negative influence on their financial prospects. “I think if we sell our house tomorrow, that we receive one euro. (...) We have dedicated our life, worked hard, invested greatly... What is it currently worth? Close to nothing. That is incredibly disturbing.” (respondent 5). Other respondents, however, nuanced the possible impact on property value. “That is similar to stock increasing and declining on the market. You only notice it when you are buying or selling. I suspect that people will have a rather short-term memory.” (respondent 6).

A second type of consequence that was rather frequently mentioned was the possibility of physical consequences. In retrospect, the inhabitants claim to feel responsible for ingesting the amounts of PFOS that they have. “You are basically hurting your health by eating your own organic vegetables. I find that lamentable, really.” (respondent 6). Certain respondents also reassess their health-related issues from the past in light of the pollution.

“I have encountered some health problems and I am worried whether those issues can be attributed to the PFOS-pollution. I have had my blood drawn and my levels were through the roof. Of course I am worried about the possible effects that it may have in the long term or may have had in the past. I absolutely consider it to be a poisoning.” (respondent 18).

Thirdly, for some respondents the damage proved to be more of a mental burden. “You start to think about it more, you read about it more. Finally, you come to the conclusion that you have been living on a time bomb for years.” For some it proves difficult to deal with the pastime activities they are having to give up. As respondent 12 mentioned: “Our hobby is our garden. Right now, just working in the garden, is working in pollution.”

However, some respondents could not help but notice that PFOS is not the only source of pollution in the neighbourhood. “Whether or not this is a consequence of the PFOS-pollution or the highway that is located nearby, that is hard to say. Particulate matter is omnipresent.” (respondent 27).

A minority of respondents claimed not to suffer any damages from the PFOS pollution. These people were located mostly at the top of the age spectrum in the respondent group. Some of them felt that the ‘no regret’-measures did not concern them. As respondent 7 pointed out: “We don’t have

chickens running around and we don't grow our own fruit to eat." To others, the crisis just simply did not matter. "Basically, I don't care. Not so long ago, I went to my annual blood sampling from my doctor. (...) When she asked me about finding out my PFOS-level, I answered her that I didn't want to know." (respondent 10).

7.1.3. Level of awareness

A different aspect that can influence the inhabitants' perceptions of 3M's crisis communication, is the extent to which they are familiar with the crisis and its consequences. Throughout the interviews, it became apparent that some inhabitants were not as well-informed as others. For example, a great deal of confusion exists around the 'no regret'-measures. As respondent 23 wondered: "I thought the advice only referred to eggs and not to homegrown fruit and vegetables?". Some inhabitants were also convinced that distance had an important influence on the risk they ran. "Damage? Personally, we live a bit further away. But I think, for the people who live more close by it must be horrible." (respondent 22). However, at the moment, there is no evidence indicating to where the pollution reaches. It was also unclear to some whether or not the pollution was still ongoing. Certain inhabitants were unsure if and when 3M quit the emission of PFOS. "The production has ceased, at least that is what they say. I can only assume that that is the truth..." (respondent 23)

7.2. 3M's crisis communication

7.2.1. Information inquiry

In a second stage, the inhabitants were asked about the communication they received surrounding the PFOS-crisis. When asked about the first time they had heard about the crisis, the respondents cited multiple channels. Most of the respondents claim to have heard about the crisis through the media. At the time, the crisis was broadcast via all media channels, "so that includes television, newspapers and the radio" (respondent 18). "You had to live on Mars not to learn about the crisis.

Especially as an inhabitant of Zwijndrecht, you cannot help but be interested.” (respondent 6). For all of the respondents, this was the first time they had heard the word ‘PFOS’: “Most of the people were not at all aware of it, no one. Until the scandal erupted, no one had ever mentioned the word ‘PFOS’, not family, not friends, never.” (respondent 17).

Social media also proved to be a helpful channel for many. Respondent 4 learned about the crisis “initially and perhaps primarily through social media, Facebook.”. For some, this even became their main source of information. “I wasn’t present on Facebook anymore, nor passively. With the PFOS-crisis, I reopened my account in order to actively search for information about PFOS.” (respondent 18). However, others immediately mentioned possible downsides of using social media as a source. “In itself, social media is quite unreliable as a source.” (respondent 22). “Everyone can speak their mind on there, some more nuanced than others” (respondent 14). “It is often ill-founded” (respondent 16).

A small minority heard about the pollution through acquaintances, action groups or the municipality. Respondent 5, for example, was informed “through the city and partly through the alderman of Environment.” Respondents 14 and 15 remember mostly the “municipal magazine” and the activist groups “Zwijndrecht Gezond and Grondrecht”.

About half of the interviewees then started actively looking for information about PFOS and the crisis. “I really had to look for decent information actively. In fact, that should have come from 3M as well.” (respondent 3). These respondents were eager to find out information that could help them deal with the crisis.

“I actively searched for information, mostly through the municipality. But the information there was quite limited. (...) I also asked a few questions through an acquaintance. And then the newspaper of course. (...) You really had to put in a lot of effort to find information or communication about it” (respondent 8).

The other half claimed to be more passive when it comes to information acquisition. “The information we received through the city, all that information, we did read it. But we didn’t necessarily go any further than that.” (respondent 24). One of the reasons given for this passive approach was resignation. Some interviewees felt that they had no control over the situation. They were convinced that actively looking for information was pointless.

7.2.2. Communication from 3M

Even though about half of the interviewees actively went looking for information on the matter, not a single interviewee declared having received any communication from 3M specifically. None of the 31 interviewees remember receiving any message from 3M directly. “They did not communicate. Zero. Nothing. That is most deplorable.” (respondent 2). “I stand by that. I have never heard anything from 3M.” (respondent 7).

“That would have been my expectation as an inhabitant of Zwijndrecht. We live quite close to the plant. At least some form of communication should have been sent out: orally or through a letter. Anything really...” (respondent 8)

Since no direct communication was sent to the inhabitants of Zwijndrecht and the respondents heard of the PFOS-crisis through generally available channels, it can be concluded that 3M’s communication was no different towards the affected public than the general public. “My friends, who live on the complete opposite side of Antwerp, have the same information as I do. Because they read the same newspapers and they watch the same news on television.” (respondent 13).

The respondents then went on to talk about the timing of 3M’s communication. Many of them mention that 3M did not reveal the crisis, but merely responded to allegations. “They quit production in the early 2000s: (...) But at that time, no communication was issued.” (respondent 22) “Now, all of a sudden it is ‘big business’. But they had known about it for a very long time and never communicated about any of it.” (respondent 9). Some respondents were even under the impression that 3M would have never communicated about the crisis if it was not revealed by an external party. Respondent 17, for example, stated: “I am unsure who set the ball rolling, but if they had not done that, we would still not be aware up to this day.”. Respondent 28 linked this to their reserved attitude: “That proves that we don’t know everything yet and we might never know the full story.”

When being asked about their perception of the responsibility that 3M took in this situation, the response was close to unanimous. All but one respondent claimed that 3M had never shouldered any responsibility in their communication. (The singular respondent referred to the fact that 3M had promised to compensate two farmers). Many of the respondents perceived the company as evasive and denying any form of responsibility for the crisis.

“They minimise it. They try to look the other way. They are not very clear in their communication either. I believe that they mainly consult their lawyers to know what they can and can’t say. They are extremely careful.” (respondent 2)

Some interviewees talked about the possible consequences for 3M if they had taken responsibility for the pollution. Most interviewees link accepting responsibility to possible financial consequences for 3M. “If they were to assume responsibility, as 3M, they would automatically admit guilt. That would give rise to a precedent.” (respondent 28). “I can only assume that they are evading responsibility because they do not want to provide compensation” (respondent 21). Shouldering responsibility usually implies that a company takes action to address the problem at hand. Therefore, the interviewees were asked whether they received any sort of plan from 3M to deal with the pollution. Again, most participants claimed never to have seen a plan of action. “There is no communication, but there is also not one step in the general direction of trying to find a solution for the problem.” (respondent 17). Some mentioned that they could not remember. For multiple respondents this was another example of the effort that 3M was making to dismiss all responsibility for the pollution. As respondent 6 explained: “Seems to be a simple fact to me: if they were to propose a plan to deal with the crisis, they would implicitly admit that that is necessary, that there are damages.”

The respondents were also asked if they had ever received any form of apology from 3M. Not one participant recalled an apology coming from 3M. “Not that I saw. It didn’t arrive here in-person, via mail or post. Not at all.” (respondent 21) Some respondents found this understandable, since the investigation was still pending at that time. “As long as no verdict is pronounced, I reckon 3M will not apologise.” (respondent 9). Others found a reasoning behind 3M’s tactics: “They will not [apologise] because it does not fall within their communication policy to minimise any possible guilt with a prospect of a future law suit.” (respondent 6).

7.2.3. Impression of 3M’s communication

During all of the interviews, the inhabitants were asked how they felt about 3M’s crisis communication. A great number of participants were disappointed in the lack of communication

from 3M. Respondent 8 found it “regrettable” and respondent 20 “beneath contempt”. This disappointment also led to frustration: “I try not to let it affect my mood, but I am actually angry with 3M.” (respondent 6). “In my opinion, the way in which 3M is communicating now, it’s very weak. It is shameful really. One might even say criminal, since the situation involves our public health.” (respondent 17).

3M did, however, appear in the media on very few occasions since certain fragments of the committee of inquiry, in which 3M appeared, were broadcast. Almost all of the interviewees indicate having seen at least some form of communication from 3M in the news. They were then asked about their impressions of the company during that communication. The general impression of 3M’s appearance was not very positive. Many respondents allude to the fact that 3M came prepared for battle. “They were very professional and stand-offish. They did not say anything more than what was necessary.” (respondent 10). “The one time they are being confronted with their actions, they arrive with an army of top lawyers and a lorry of files to one-up our government officials.” (respondent 7). Others were under the impression that 3M was not interested in the affair.

Some interviewees claimed that they were not able to understand some parts of the discussion. They mentioned the importance of comprehensibility. As respondent 20 recalled: “I have seen some excerpts from the news and a particular channel regarding the Flemish Parliament. I tried to understand the conversation but sometimes it became so technical, that it was difficult for an ordinary citizen to comprehend.”

There was one statement in particular, uttered by 3M officials, that offended quite a few of the respondents. When the inhabitants were worried about the high amounts of PFOS in their blood, 3M attempted to dismiss their concerns by stating that their employees had far higher PFOS-amounts and that they were not ill.

“Research among 3M employees – including in Zwijndrecht – who are generally more exposed to these substances than the general public, do not display a negative impact on their health as a result of PFOS-exposure.” (Lefevere & Calluy, 2021, June 29).

Many of the interviewees cited this statement from 3M in order to demonstrate the lack of concern 3M showed for public health. Respondent 17: “They not only have zero respect for the people that

live here, but also towards their own employees!”. “My grandfather smoked his entire life and never had lung cancer. Are we going to claim that smoking cigarettes is healthy? (respondent 16).

If a company deflects responsibility, minimizes the circumstances and does not apologise, can that company be perceived as honest? According to the respondents, the answer is no. Almost all interviewees relate that they feel 3M was not honest in its communication. 3M seemed “Closed off. If there was a question that could be answered with a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’, than the answer was simply a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’. Sometimes ‘I don’t know’. By no means transparent.” (respondent 18). Again, many respondents felt that 3M’s dishonesty was connected to possible legal liability.

“I believe they were not sincere. During all of its communication, 3M had the same idea in the back of their minds: we have to limit possible damage as much as possible. We cannot admit anything, because that might be used against us in a lawsuit later on. We must safeguard our company preventively.” (respondent 6)

Some respondents, however, disagreed with the majority. Respondent 23, for example, shared a nuanced perspective: “Everyone always tells their truth, they will presumably have told theirs as well”. Respondent 3, on the other hand, was convinced that 3M was being honest, while making a clear distinction between honesty and authenticity:

“I cannot imagine that they would be telling lies. On the contrary, they are very much prepared and know exactly what they can and cannot say. You can feel in in their communication. They will not say anything that is absolutely false, because then they would be open to litigation. They are just very careful. (...) But of course that is not authentic, not at all.”

Most of the interviewees were therefore asked about their perception of authenticity. Almost all participants argued that 3M did not come across as authentic during its communication. “Today my trust is seriously damaged” (respondent 27). Some attributed this to the fact that 3M is a multinational. Quite of few respondents mentioned that they had expected nothing different from a big company. “[sighs] trust... In reality there is not one large company that you can trust.” (respondent 4). “I don’t think a multinational will ever apologise. I don’t expect that [laughs] that is wishful thinking.” (respondent 5). Even though they expected this, the respondents still were not pleased : “Logical, but I don’t approve.” (respondent 4). Noteworthy, however, is that this is not

true for everyone. Some respondents were reassured by the fact that 3M is a multinational. As respondent 3 clarified:

“The only reassurance is that it is a very large company, a very rich company with substantial means. Therefore, when it comes to remediation or... I would say they can afford it. Think of compensating the people or preventing this from happening again by additional investments. Such a company can afford it.”

Another argument that was often cited was the fact that 3M is an American company. For many inhabitants, organisations from the United States handle crises differently than organisations from Europe, more specifically Belgium. “The thought that came to mind was that it was typically American: sending a representative from the US to handle the matter.” (respondent 27). “Real Americans: big, big, big and money, money, money” (respondent 25). As respondent 10 explained: “It is a completely different mindset than the Europeans. They see everything much bigger, because they are much larger themselves.” Respondent 1 added: “I am under the impression that they were implementing an American approach. When they said ‘no comment, we don’t know, we don’t want to know’. It was mainly very evasive”.

7.3. Ideal crisis communication

In a third and final stage, the interviewees turned their attention to what type of organisational response they would have expected from a company in a similar crisis situation. The respondents were asked to describe their ideal crisis communication. All of the respondents had a clear idea of what elements crisis communication should contain. Even though the ideal communication differed among most participants, certain elements were mentioned by almost all of them. This section will deal with those recurring elements: i.e. the content, accepting responsibility, the value of an apology, collaboration and dialogue, compensation, target audience, timing and channels. All answers are discussed below.

7.3.1. Content

In a first phase, the content of the message was invoked. A recurring staple in the content of the message was the explanation of the crisis. All respondents talked about the importance of transparency and clear information about what transpired. “In my opinion, just explain in a transparent way what happened over time in chronological order, what measures you implemented and whether there are still steps you want to take in the future.” (respondent 2). The interviewees also showed a high tolerance for the lack of certainties in the beginning of a crisis. “I understand that they do not have all the information yet and that they also run into insecurities. I have no problem whatsoever with them being honest about that.” (respondent 2).

Apart from an explanation of the crisis, the interviewees also talked about a different need in crisis times. Almost all of the participants struggled to deal with the crisis accordingly. They were not informed about what was safe and what was not. Many of the inhabitants talked about their need for practical information. As respondent 11 illustrated: “What can I do? Can I walk around safely? Normally I maintain a small soccer field in the neighbourhood, can I continue doing that? Can I mow my lawn?”. Many respondents also talked about the insecurity and stress that came as a result of the crisis. “They say that there is little clarity about the possible consequences. (...) You still have to communicate in an engaged way with the people that are being confronted with a lot of insecurity.” (respondent 2). Remarkably, many respondents expressed a need for practical information in order to take away their current insecurity and stress. As respondent 8 revealed: “Just information about ‘what now and what will the impact be on our residence and health? (...) Now we have a ton of questions that remain unanswered.”

Furthermore, while discussing the need for information in order to deal with the crisis mentally and physically, an interesting objection arose. Some people claimed not to expect this type of information from 3M. Respondent 18, for example, did not have enough confidence in 3M to communicate about this:

“I do not believe that 3M is a trustworthy partner. First they pollute for 20 years or longer and then they are going to tell you how to deal with it? That just isn’t credible to me. (...) 3M, that

is not their role. They are a private company. It is up to the authorities to control and communicate.” (respondent 21).

7.3.2. Assuming responsibility

A second aspect that was often mentioned, was the perception of responsibility. All interviewees, without exception, wanted the company involved to take responsibility for what happened. According to the local residents, the company needs to: “show that they mean it. Ask questions to the public in order to find out what can be done to tackle the situation.” (respondent 3). 3M could have done that by “communicating in a involved, empathic way and being concerned with the local residents.” (respondent 2). Some respondents also elaborated on what shouldering responsibility means to them: “It is making sure to keep the situation under control as much as possible and ensuring that the pollution is cleaned up.” (respondent 14). “That is the least you can do, showing a minimum of commitment.” (respondent 1). For some respondents, assuming responsibility is even a prerequisite for communication. “As long as they don’t [take responsibility], they can communicate whatever they want, it would mean nothing.” (respondent 3).

7.3.3. Value of an apology

A third item that was discussed during all of the interviews, was an apology. This was one of the subjects that the interviewees were most divided on. Three different opinions can be distinguished among the respondents. Firstly, to some people, an apology was essential. As respondent 7 explained: “The damage has already been done, but at least an apology and a word of explanation”. Some participants immediately linked the apology to other consequences. “That would indicate that they are finally taking their responsibility, which they haven’t done in the past.” (respondent 6).

A second group of respondents mentioned that they would have liked an apology, but that the apology in itself would not have been enough. According to them, the apology had to be accompanied by concrete actions. “That is valuable, but it doesn’t solve the issue. So it is good, but

it is only the first step in all that has to follow.” (respondent 17). “It is even more valuable when you say: ‘I’m sorry people, but we will do this to fix it.’. Because you can say ‘I’m sorry’ a thousand times. (...) However, something needs to be done.” (respondent 13).

While this topic was being discussed, many respondents found it necessary to make a clear distinction between apologising and actually taking responsibility. “For me, they don’t have to apologise, it has no value to me. (...) I think, the only thing that can make this situation right, is if they would actually take responsibility for what they have caused here.” (respondent 17). For some, the act of apologising even became unnecessary when responsibility is being taken: “So how can they apologise? They can’t. They can shoulder responsibility.” (respondent 9).

Finally, a number of respondents advised against implementing an apology. These people considered the apology superfluous since it has no effect on the situation. Respondent 1 explained: “I am inclined to take a more rational approach. I would simply expect an explanation of what you have done as a company.” An apology can never be equivalent to the harm that was caused: “What will that bring us? As I said: a hat from 3M? A lighter? In that respect, I don’t see how you can compensate for what happened.” (respondent 9).

7.3.4. Collaboration and dialogue

During a number of interviews the importance of collaboration and dialogue was stressed. The affected public wanted to feel like 3M was open to working together to solve the issue at hand. “There needs to be a clear intention to tackle the problem together.” (respondent 1). According to the interviewees, that collaboration may include many different parties. Some mentioned the role of the government: “Looking at it together with the authorities. There are still many insecurities, but showing that they are willing to monitor the situation together.” (respondent 2). Others envisioned that collaboration with the affected public, in this case: the inhabitants of Zwijndrecht. This can be linked to the lack of perceived dialogue between 3M and the participants: “This is important to a lot of people. I appreciate being able to tell my story, because we haven’t really gotten the opportunity. We haven’t been heard. We feel like just a number.” (respondent 8). For some respondents this included a possibility of debate and an openness to questions and differing opinions. When

respondent 10 was asked about an ideal scenario, the answer was the following: “I wanted them to collaborate with the municipality and other environmental partners (...) and say: let us go to the library in Zwijndrecht with plenty of people, let everyone speak their minds and we can also say our piece.” This concept of dialogue also includes a possibility to receive more information. As respondent 21 said: “It should include a straightforward way to ask for additional information.”

Many of the interviewees expressed the hope that the results of this study would find its way to 3M and to the authorities. As respondent 17 stated: “I hope that, one way or another, this finds its way to 3M and other relevant bodies, such as the government or the city. (...) That this could be used as a foundation to express what concerns the inhabitants are living with.”

7.3.5. Compensation

A fifth factor that was discussed during the interviews was compensation. This aspect emerged since the crisis had a considerable impact on the inhabitants and their surroundings. About half of the interviewees claimed that some form of financial compensation was necessary. “They inflicted damage. (...) I believe there should be a financial compensation.” (respondent 18). For others, the financial compensation was much less important than information about the crisis. As respondent 12 pleaded: “They probably have some sort of fund that can pay for what happened. But I am not interested in how they will compensate us, I want to know what happened. (...) That information is being withheld. 3M zero point zero communication.”. A last group of participants were convinced that no financial means could compensate for the pollution. Interviewee 19, for example, said: “I don’t see how you can compensate for what happened.”

7.3.6. Target audience

A key concept that was subsequently treated during the interviews was the target audience. It is important to determine who the crisis communication is directed to. The interviewees were asked whether they envisioned the crisis communication differently towards the affected public than

towards the general public. Again, the opinions differed. Most of the participants envisioned a separate communication towards the inhabitants of Zwijndrecht. For some, that difference was mostly chronological: “I feel that the inhabitants should be involved sooner and more, but I do believe everyone has the right to know. (respondent 13). Other participants believed that the communication towards them would be different content-wise. Respondent 20 based his entire ideal crisis communication around his target audience: “I am not talking about the general population, but specifically about the people that live in a certain radius.”

The reason is that the impact for the inhabitants of Zwijndrecht was significantly bigger than the general public: “I believe that that cannot be the same communication, simply because the consequences for the whole of Belgium are very different than the consequences for the people who live so close by.” (respondent 27). A small minority of the respondents had a more nuanced view: “The core should be the same. But I can imagine that certain concrete measures will be taken, specifically designed for inhabitants. So the communication might differ slightly. At the very least, it should be truthful.” (respondent 21).

Only a handful of respondents saw the communication to the affected public and the general public as identical. “In this case, that is practically the same since it has such a large impact on the whole of Flanders.” (respondent 22). “I am convinced that the general public can also have access to that type of information. Can or even should.” (respondent 18). Respondent 16 was firm: “No. Everyone has the right to know.”

7.3.7. Timing

In the following paragraphs, this result section will deal with the ideal timing for crisis communication according to the affected public. The participants were asked at what point in time they expected communication from 3M. The large majority of respondents stated that they wanted 3M to communicate as soon as possible. Since information about when the pollution actually started was still vague, the precise moment differed between the respondents. For respondent 14 that was: “before they started their production here.”, while respondent 15 claimed that it should have been “a long time ago, even from the seventies.” Respondent 17 looked at the timing in comparison to

the moment the crisis appeared in the press: “It is not because it will appear in the media, that you don’t have to communicate before it does.” Some participants also mentioned that the perceived severity of the crisis is less when it is communicated sooner. As respondent 22 explained: “Truly ideal would have been that they had communicated in 2004. (...)Then there would probably not have been a scandal either, because no one understood what it was.”

Nevertheless, some respondents nuanced the idea of communicating as soon as possible. Those participants adopted the standpoint of the company. As respondent 10 explained: “You shouldn’t [communicate] from the start... First, you have to be well-informed about the issues at hand and you need to have answers. (...) The worst possible scenario is when the opposite party finding flaws in your reasoning and you cannot provide answers. That makes you look ridiculous.”

Other interviewees saw their ideal timing completely different. For some, the time to communicate is when a company realises the severity of the crisis. Others mentioned that it was unrealistic to expect a company to make such information public proactively. They felt that it was only right that 3M started reacting when the crisis hit the media. As respondent 1 explained: “Yes, the moment it appears in the press, that is when you should react. Proactive? That might not be realistic for a company to do, because it always causes reputational damage.” Some respondents talked about a downside of not coming out with the crisis information proactively. “It is not very clever from them [3M]. In this case, they are letting the action groups et cetera communicate on their own. They [3M] are not communicating at all, that can result in the situation appearing bigger than it actually is.” (respondent 2).

Finally, a small minority of respondents claimed that crisis communication ought to be an ongoing process that is not defined by one specific moment. When being asked when that communication had best been sent out, respondent 18 answered: “Always. From the moment that they were somewhat aware of the situation.”. Respondent 9 agreed: “Maybe a clear update. Of course that doesn’t have to be daily, but that they at least keep you informed about what is going on.” (respondent 9).

7.3.8. Channels

Finally, the participants were asked what they believed was the best way to contact the affected public. They were prompted to name any and every channel that they deemed fit for crisis communication. Again, the answers varied across the interviewees. A very small amount of the respondents mentioned the media as a suitable way to communicate. Respondent 26 stated: “It is fine by me to show it on television and publicise it in the newspaper. I believe that should suffice.” Most participants did not agree with this medium for the inhabitants specifically: “The press is too general in my opinion. Not for Flanders as a whole, but for the local residents.” (respondent 22).

About one in five respondents mentioned the use of information evenings for spreading crisis communication. “They [3M] have a rather large site, they definitely have assembly halls where they can organise a couple of sessions.” (respondent 8). Some respondents mentioned both advantages and disadvantages: “An information evening can definitely be a solution for some people, because they allow for questions to be asked actively and interactively. But for me it wouldn’t be a solution because I simply do not have the time to allocate to something like that.” (respondent 27).

The most popular communication option among the respondents was a letter. More than half of the interviewees thought that a letter would be the most advisable channel. Especially when people were thinking about a way of reaching the entirety of the affected public, the letter seemed to be the preferred option: “I mean, there is also a great number of elderly people. They are not really into the internet.” (respondent 9). However, some respondents disagreed with the implementation of a letter. The downside of a letter is that it lacks dialogic potential. As respondent 28 revealed: “Using letters and e-mails... Many people will think that is fine. But of course you have more questions you want to ask. (...) Questions and answers lie at the root of a constructive solution.” Therefore, a very popular variation, was a letter with an invitation to an information evening. Many respondents saw this as the best of both worlds, since it gives people the opportunity to get more information actively, but does not force them too.

A couple of the respondents thought an e-mail would be ideal. Respondent 6 made a reference to the weekly e-mail he receives from the municipality of Zwijndrecht. He saw it as an opportunity for

3M and Zwijndrecht to work together: “I receive weekly e-mails from the city of Zwijndrecht. (...) This could have been communicated to the people via their own channels.”

Throughout a handful of interviews, the company website was mentioned as a solid option for communicating. “You either do that personally or you publicise it on your website, but at least you show some kind of involvement, I think.” Others specifically mentioned the website in a negative light: “You really have to put in effort to visit a website.” (respondent 2). “I feel that proper information cannot be read clearly on a computer or smartphone.” (respondent 15).

The last communication channel that was reported in the interviews was social media. Social media was mostly mentioned in a negative light. One respondent thought that social media could be useful for crisis communication, but more so for reaching the entire public rather than the affected public. “When we are talking about what a company should do to inform the public, then I do believe their communication team should include social media.” (respondent 1). Most respondents, however, disagreed and saw mostly disadvantages of the medium: “It is still a severe case. Just posting a picture on Instagram is not enough in my eyes.” (respondent 2).

A final train of thought that arose among the interviewees was the use of multiple communication channels. Respondent 5 claimed: “It doesn’t matter. There are so many ways to communicate.” “A letter, an information evening, it can never suffice. For the protection of the citizens, it can never be enough.” (respondent 12). Respondent 17 elaborated on this idea:

“I don’t think that there is ‘one right way’ to communicate. I also don’t believe that this is something you can do only once. (...) So, in my opinion, there should be information evenings, letters on a recurring basis. Actively communicating in order to spark a conversation between the people and 3M. There needs to be time for people’s issues and questions. It is a process.”

8. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore crisis communication from a perspective that was mostly omitted in prior research: the affected public. To that end, three central questions were formulated regarding 3M's crisis communication during the PFOS crisis. In order to summarize and understand the answers of the interviewees, this discussion section will treat the findings in a more general way, while linking them with prior crisis communication literature.

Firstly, this discussion section will treat the affected public's perspective of the crisis and their need for information. The impacted public is a group of stakeholders that experience hardship from a crisis. In this case, the inhabitants of Zwijndrecht living in the vicinity of the 3M factory constitute an affected public. The findings from the in-depth interviews reveal the degree to which members of this community indeed perceived damage from the situation. This study confirms that the negative consequences for victims can be physical, mental and financial (Coombs, 2015a). The participants perceived not only different types of damage, but also different degrees of harm. Since some inhabitants claimed not to suffer consequences from the PFOS pollution, this supports former claims that the impacted public rarely forms a homogenous group of people (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011).

During the interviews, it became clear that some participants were less informed than others. A possible explanation for this can be the information overload that the public deals with in the initial stages of a crisis (Coombs, 2015a). Since the respondents had never heard of the substance before, they were still actively trying to interpret all of the available information (Lin et al., 2016). Interestingly, as soon as the crisis became known, the need for information among the inhabitants evolved. Austin et al. (2012) claim that the public needs an explanation of the crisis and a responsible party. Additionally, due to their high involvement, the impacted public will need information on how to protect itself. (Anthony et al., 2013). This study found those claims to be true. To gather the necessary information, the respondents adopted either an active or a passive approach.

Secondly, this section will address 3M's crisis communication during the PFOS crisis. Since the initial stages of the crisis can be overwhelming for stakeholders, organisations should aim to be the "first and best source of information" (Heath, 2006, p.). However, the findings of this study indicate that 3M did not communicate to the impacted public specifically. Moreover, the respondents

claimed not to have seen any communication from 3M. This can be defined as a stonewalling strategy (Le et al., 2019). Silence is proven to be a rather ineffective crisis response strategy when an organisation is deemed responsible for a crisis (Coombs et al., 2016). Additionally, this crisis implied concerns for public health. Since there are significant risks for both the inhabitants and the environment, Kaufman et al. (1994) assert that the organisation has to communicate quickly and accurately to remove the hazard. The fact that 3M implements a stonewalling strategy in the wake of a preventable crisis, further proves the gap between crisis communication theory and practice (Kim et al., 2009).

This silent, cautious approach resulted in negative impressions among the inhabitants. They perceived 3M as evasive and denying responsibility for the crisis. According to the interviewees, 3M also did not apologise for the crisis. Crisis communication theory encourages organisations to accept the responsibility that is being attributed to them by the public (Benoit, 1997) and to implement an apology when attributions are high (Coombs, 2007). Yet, in practice, companies are reluctant to admit fault and apologise since it can lead to financial and legal concerns (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016; Coombs & Holladay, 2008). These negative opinions also extended to the participants' view of 3M's honesty and authenticity. Almost all of the interviewees perceived 3M as not open, transparent or authentic. Research shows, however, that authenticity can have a positive impact for reputational repair (Claeys et al., 2013). Again, this lack of transparency was linked by the participants to a fear of potential litigation. A prominent finding of this study is that the participants proved to be very much aware of the legal and financial risks that organisations face. The respondents seemed to be angered by the fact that 3M was avoiding legal liability, instead of focusing on public health.

Organisational trust is a central concept for the organisation-stakeholder relationship (Coombs, 2015a). In the wake of the crisis, however, the local residents expressed a lack of trust in 3M. Two explanations for this lack of faith were cited. Firstly, the interviewees talked about the type of organisation: a multinational. Secondly, a clear distinction was made between the European and American mindset. These findings are in line with prior research on globalisation. Globalisation can be a challenge for crisis communication practitioners. Multinationals should consider how their operations will be perceived by international publics and adapt their communication accordingly (Taylor, 2000).

Thirdly, the local residents living in the vicinity of the 3M plant were also asked about their expectations of organisational crisis communication. In this way, ideal crisis communication can be explored from an affected public perspective. Content-wise, the participants expected an explanation of the crisis and practical information on how to deal with the situation. This confirms the value of an ethical base response (Coombs, 2015a). Effective instructional messages give stakeholders “the knowledge, ability and motivation” to protect themselves both physically and mentally (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2010, p. 113). This is especially important during crises that affect the safety and well-being of the public (Kim et al., 2011). Notably, the participants did not make a clear distinction between instructing and adjusting information (Sturges, 1994). They claimed that practical information was needed in order to take away the stress and uncertainty that resulted from the crisis.

Next, the subject of responsibility was touched on. The respondents wanted 3M to take responsibility for the pollution in words and actions. This is in line with Butler’s (2021) findings that indicated that the impacted public needs information about the role of the company and its intended plan of action. Interestingly, if organisations do not accept responsibility, communicating becomes meaningless. This would imply that organisations will not benefit from communicating purely to reduce reputational harm.

In prior crisis communication research, the implementation of an apology is encouraged, especially when attributions of responsibility are high (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). The opinions of the respondents on apologies were very much divided. While the importance of an apology was stressed by most, adding concrete actions to support those words was deemed crucial. For others, apologies held no actual value in crisis times. Additionally, an interesting trade-off was mentioned. According to the respondents the need for an apology disappeared when the company assumed responsibility for the crisis. Even though the futility of a pseudo-apology became clear, the actual value of an apology remains undetermined. This seems to be a personal, rather than a generalisable preference.

During the interviews, the significance of dialogue was emphasised. The local residents stressed the need for ongoing communication between the organisation and the public (Lin et al., 2016; Massey, 2001). The interviewees argued that organisations in crisis not only have to communicate, but also listen. This seems logical, since crises trigger an overload of questions from the public (Marra, 1998). Hence, organisations must listen and respond to the public and their concerns by being open,

accessible and providing a free flow of information (Seeger, 2006). This will lead to mutually beneficial relationships between the organisation and the public (Heath, 2006). This approach is deemed ethical, since it nurtures honesty, trust and genuine compassion. The findings of these study provides further encouragement for a dialogic approach to crisis communication (Kent & Taylor, 2001).

Another very important aspect is the target audience of crisis communication. Frandsen and Johansen (2011) claim that it is important to differentiate between different stakeholder groups since they have differing stakes. Most participants envisioned a separate communication for the affected public and the general public. The opinions varied whether this involved a chronological or a content-related difference. This finding confirms the research on prioritising various stakeholder groups based on the specific context of the crisis (Xu & Li, 2013). However not everyone seemed to agree. Some local residents believed that everyone had the right to know all of the information.

Crisis communication research advocates for a stealing thunder strategy: i.e. the organisation self-discloses the crisis (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). In the past, many advantages of the strategy have been highlighted. For example, self-disclosing a crisis leads the organisation seeming more credible and the crisis less severe (Claeys, 2017). Most of the local residents showed a preference for stealing thunder. Interestingly, some interviewees expected a thunder strategy, since the stealing thunder approach seemed unrealistic to them.

Lastly, this discussion section will deal with the appropriate channels for crisis communication. While the use of both traditional media and social media during a crisis is recommended (Austin et al., 2012), these channels might be too general for the affected public. The participants seemed to favour a more personal approach. The most popular channel among the interviewees involved a letter with an invitation to an information evening. This channel informs the local residents who are more passive in their information acquisition, whilst giving the more active residents the opportunity for dialogue. Importantly, the local residents stressed that crisis communication must be drafted in such a way that it is comprehensible for the affected public. This confirms the importance of formulating scientific information to be understandable for lay audiences (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). Based on the differing opinions on crisis communication channels, this research suggests that the choice of channel might not be straightforward.

9. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study attempts to shed a light on the perspective of the local residents in Zwijndrecht on the PFOS crisis. There are some limitations to this study that provide suggestions for further research. Firstly, there are some reservations about the case study method. This paper only focused on one particular crisis situation, one specific type of company (i.e. chemical company) and one particular type of affected public (i.e. local residents). The conclusions drawn from these interviews are not generalizable to all affected publics in all crisis situations. Ideally, other affected publics would also be interviewed about their perspective, such as the employees of 3M. As suggested by respondent 14: “How does such an employer communicate to its own staff?”. This would give a deeper understanding of the differing views of stakeholders and how these views can contradict each other (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000). Additionally, the perspectives of the community oftentimes change during the course of a crisis life cycle. Since the interviews, 3M has had information meetings with local residents (Pieters, 2022, June 1) and agreed to invest 571 million euros to remediate the pollution (Maerevoet, 2022, July 6). Therefore, it is likely that the opinions of the participants have changed overtime.

Second, even though a fairly large sample of residents was interviewed, these are not representative for the general community living near the 3M factory. Even though many variables were accounted for (e.g. gender), the pool of respondents displayed certain limitations (e.g. age). Further research could widen the scope to other age categories. This would enhance the representativeness of the results.

Lastly, there is also an important nuance to be added regarding the results. None of the participants received any form of communication directly from 3M. Therefore, the respondents based their views on excerpts from the committee of inquiry that were broadcast on television. However, these fragments cannot be seen as completely objective. The media decide what is worth mentioning and what is not. As respondent 10 pointed out: “As far as I know of course. The excerpts that are being broadcast on television have also been cut and edited. (...) Good news is no news.” However, the fact that the participants were aware that the media can be biased, gives the impression that they implement a healthy amount of common sense.

10. CONCLUSION

This current study enhances the body of literature on crisis communication by investigating the perspective of the affected public regarding crises and crisis communication. To this end, 27 in-depth interviews were conducted with local residents of Zwijndrecht living in the vicinity of the 3M plant. The participants were asked about their personal experiences with the PFOS-pollution, their perspective on 3M's crisis communication and their view of ideal crisis communication. Based on the findings that were discussed, a number of theoretical and practical implications can be deduced.

Crisis communication research should consider the perspective of not only customers, media and employees, but also of the affected stakeholders. Organisations in crisis have to prioritise stakeholder groups based on the specific context of the crisis, as suggested by Xu and Li (2013). During the various stages of the crisis, this priority might shift to other stakeholder groups. However, in the early stages of the crisis, organisations should focus their attention on potential victims and provide them with strategic crisis communication. This study indicates that the affected public does show specific information needs that are often not considered by organisations.

The findings from this study offer practical implications for organisations in crisis as well. Based on this study, organisations in crisis are encouraged to provide crisis communication that considers the affected public. First, crisis teams are advised to provide timely communication rooted in the ethical base response (Coombs, 2015a). This includes both instructing and adjusting information that encourages the impacted public to participate in self-protective behaviour. Second, organisations confronted with a crisis that can affect the community in which they operate, should value dialogue with local residents. Organisations are recommended to listen to the public's concerns and questions. The focus should lay with the public health and well-being instead of reputational repair and legal liability. Third, when communicating with stakeholders who are directly affected by a crisis, messages should be developed in a manner that is comprehensible for all audiences. Finally, organisations should always consider the local specificities of their target audience, by navigating the complex cultural dynamics in a globalised world.

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13. APPENDIX

13.1. PFOS crisis Timeline

Overview of the PFOS crisis timeline

Date	Event	Remarks	Source
1950	First piece of evidence that PFOs could be potentially harmful: PFAS accumulates in the blood of mice	Exhibit 1009 https://www.ag.state.mn.us/Office/Cases/3M/StatesExhibits.asp	(Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, April 26a)
1980	3M informs its employees in the Antwerp subsidiary of accumulation of chemicals in the blood through an internal memo		(Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, April 26a)
2002	Aware of PFOS-pollution in the surroundings of Zwijndrecht => production of PFOS is halted		(Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, June 2)
2004 -2006	First soil investigation on 3M grounds (limited)		(Poppelmonde & Winckelmans, 2021, June 17)
2009	Research by the Flemish authorities: 95% of the studied 20 to 40 year olds have too much PFOS in their blood, 85% have too much PFOA	Above that amount a negative impact on the health cannot be excluded	(Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, April 26a)
2011	PhD thesis by Wendy D'Hollander at the UA* shows high concentrations of PFOS => 3 times the value that was considered "safe" in Europe	*University of Antwerp	(Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, June 1)
2014	Research by the Flemish authorities: 77% of the studies 50 to 60 year olds exceed the limits for PFOS and PFAS		(Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, April 26b)
September - October 2017	Preparation of an extensive communication campaign to warn about the PFOS pollution	Could have been "stealing thunder"	(Poppelmonde & Winckelmans, 2021, June 17)

21/09/2017	Consultation between BAM (Lantis), Flemish Environment Agency and OVAM: objections towards communication campaign		(Poppelmonde & Winckelmans, 2021, June 18b)
27/09/2017	Email from Administrator-General Henny De Baets to BAM: "OVAM does not have the exact figures"	Contradicts information from Johan Ceenaeme, staff member of soil management at OVAM 2004-2006	(Poppelmonde & Winckelmans, 2021, June 18b)
29/09/2017	David Van Herreweghe sends a note to the Flemish ministers and senior officials in preparation of possible communication	David Van Herreweghe, chairman of the executive board of BAM	(Poppelmonde & Winckelmans, 2021, June 18b)
04/10/2017	First draft of a press release		(Poppelmonde & Winckelmans, 2021, June 18b)
06/10/2017	Jan Tytgat delivers a second rapport warning about the PFOS pollution to BAM and OVAM		(Poppelmonde & Winckelmans, 2021, June 18b)
13/10/2017	OVAM decides not to communicate and not to warrant any further research	A leaked email from a manager at OVAM suggests that this decision was influenced by the cabinet	(Poppelmonde & Winckelmans, 2021, June 17) (Mg, 2021, September 24)
17/10/2017	The information evenings that were planned are cancelled		(Poppelmonde & Winckelmans, 2021, June 17)
05/2018	BAM urges OVAM to make the public aware of the pollution	"It remains the intention of BAM en 3M to communicate about this matter proactively. "	(De Bode & Poppelmonde, 2021, September 25)

05/2018	Ovam refuses to communicate proactively after consultation of the cabinet: “As arranged we have discussed this matter internally and with the cabinet. We have decided that OCAM will not cooperate in any proactive communication initiatives at this time.”		(De Bode & Poppelmonde, 2021, September 25)
11/2018	A tomato farmer contacts BAM with questions BAM then sends an email to the responsible* for the Oosterweel works with a request for communication	*Head of cabinet from the former minister of mobility Ben Weyts (N-VA)	(De Bode & Poppelmonde, 2021, September 25)
11/2018	Again, no communication is sent out. Scenario 3 is implemented	Scenario 3: coverage from the media is awaited, all parties will communicate separately	(De Bode & Poppelmonde, 2021, September 25)
26/04/2021	Coalition of environmental organisations raise the alarm following the Oosterweel works	e.g. Bond Beter Leefmilieu and Greenpeace	(Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, April 26a)
01/06/2021	Mayor of Zwijndrecht* and the aldermen receive the results of a PFOS study	*André Van de Vyver (Groen)	(Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, June 2)
01/06/2021	Letter to the cabinet of Flemish minister of Environment*	*Zuhail Demir (N-VA)	(Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, June 2)
01/06/2021	Letter to the Flemish minister of Public Health*	*Wouter Beke (CD&V)	(Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, June 2)
02/06/2021	Foundation of action group Grondrecht by inhabitants of Antwerp Left Bank		(Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, June 2)
17/06/2021	3M exists 50 years		(Sertyn, 2021, June 17)
?/06/2021	Creation of webpage with information about PFOS by 3M	https://engage.3m.com/pfas	(Rvs, 2021, June 29)
28/06/2021	3M reacts for the first time to the PFOS pollution in a press release: “a causal link between PFOS and health damage has not been established yet”		(Rvs, 2021, June 29) (Lefevere & Calluy, 2021, June 29)
29/06/2021 14u	3M makes a statement during a hearing by the Environment Committee of the Flemish Parliament		(Rvs, 2021, June 29)

03/07/2021	Publication interview with Peter Vermeulen*	*European director of 3M	(Cools & Poppelmonde, 2021, July 3)
July – August 2021	Population screening for PFAS concerning 796 inhabitants of Zwijndrecht	https://redactie.radiocentraal.org/2022/220108_RaadVanState_PFAS.pdf	
04/09/2021	Rebecca Teeters, Peter Vermeulen and Jim Kotsmith* in the committee of inquiry	*Director Corporate Environmental bij 3M	(Vanhecke, 2021, September 4)
22/09/2021	Publication Pano documentary		(X, 2021, September 23)
24/09/2021	Flemish committee of inquiry PFOS-PFAS meets with the representatives of the Oosterweel developer Lantis		(X, 2021, September 23)
29/10/2021	Chemical company 3M has to temporarily suspend all production processes that involve PFAS		(Paelinck, 2021, October 29)
19/11/2021	No-regret measures in Zwijndrecht into effect	https://www.vlaanderen.be/pfas-vervuiling/zwijndrecht/no-regret-maatregelen-zwijndrecht	(X, 2021, November 19)
16/02/2022-28/03/2022	Interviews master's thesis PFOS are carried out		
Mid 2022	Expected completion of a new descriptive soil test concerning the surroundings of the 3M factory		(Poppelmonde & Winckelmans, 2021, June 18b)
01/06/2022	First meeting between the local residents and 3M		(Pieters, 2022, June 1)
06/07/2022	3M agreed to invest 571 million euros to remediate the pollution		(Maerevoet, 2022, July 6)

13.2. Invitation letter

Betreft: masterproefonderzoek naar communicatie 3M gedurende de PFOS-crisis



Beste meneer/ mevrouw,
Beste inwoner van Zwijndrecht,

Mijn naam is Laurence Balliu. Momenteel volg ik de Master Meertalige Communicatie aan de Universiteit van Gent. In die richting ontdek ik verschillende vormen van bedrijfscommunicatie in het Nederlands, Engels en Frans. In het kader van mijn studie, schrijf ik een masterproef over crisiscommunicatie.

Doel van het onderzoek

Specifiek onderzoek ik de communicatie van 3M met betrekking op de PFOS-vervuiling in Zwijndrecht. Ik wil nagaan welke communicatie 3M heeft uitgestuurd en hoe de inwoners van Zwijndrecht daar tegenover staan.

Waarom bent u gekozen?

Voor dit onderzoek ben ik op zoek naar respondenten die binnen een straal van 5 km rond de fabriek van 3M wonen. Door u te interviewen over de communicatie van 3M met betrekking tot de PFOS-vervuiling kan ik zicht krijgen op hoe een organisatie in crisis best communiceert met mensen die rechtstreeks betrokken zijn bij de gebeurtenissen.

Wat houdt een deelname aan de studie in?

Een deelname houdt in dat ik een interview van u afneem. Dit is een gesprek tussen u en mij, waarbij ik vragen zal stellen over hoe 3M over de PFOS-vervuiling heeft gecommuniceerd en hoe u daartegenover staat. Een interview duurt ongeveer een half uur tot een uur en gebeurt liefst in levende lijve, maar kan indien gewenst ook digitaal. De plaats en het tijdstip van het interview zullen in samenspraak worden bepaald. Het interview wordt wel opgenomen, zodat ik het achteraf kan transcriberen. Uw anonimiteit wordt gedurende de verwerking van de interviews verzekerd.

Wat zijn de mogelijke nadelen en risico's van deelname?

Het zal nodig zijn om voldoende tijd, dus een half uur tot een uur, uit te trekken voor het interview. We verwachten niet dat het interview ongemak zal veroorzaken, maar indien er onderwerpen zijn die u niet wenst te bespreken, kan u dit gewoon aan mij meedelen. Wanneer u dat wenst, kan het interview ook worden stopgezet of even worden onderbroken. Eventuele audio-opnames kunnen op dat moment op uw vraag worden gewist. Ik kijk daarbij steeds naar wat u wenst.

Kan ik mijn deelname uitstellen of stopzetten?

Wanneer u het interview wenst stop te zetten, kunt u dit doen zonder dat u daar een reden voor moet opgeven. U krijgt de gelegenheid om mij na het interview nog vragen te stellen. U kan, indien gewenst, voor verdere inlichtingen ook steeds contact opnemen met mij.

Wat zijn de mogelijke voordelen van deelname?

Er zijn geen rechtstreekse voordelen voor u als persoon. Ik kan u niet betalen voor uw tijd of deelname. Het doel van dit onderzoek is om beter inzicht te krijgen in de manier waarop 3M communiceert met omwonenden over de PFOS-vervuiling. Op basis van de bevindingen willen we adviezen formuleren voor bedrijven die in de toekomst met een crisis worden geconfronteerd.

Moet ik deelnemen?

Het staat u volkomen vrij om deel te nemen of niet. Indien u beslist om deel te nemen zal u worden gevraagd om een toestemmingsformulier te tekenen. U kunt weigeren om deel te nemen zonder dat u hiervoor een reden moet opgeven. U kan tot 7 dagen na het interview uw mening herzien.

Vertrouwelijkheid

In overeenstemming met de Algemene Verordening Gegevensbescherming en de Belgische wet van 30 juli 2018 (bescherming van natuurlijke personen met betrekking tot de verwerking van persoonsgegevens), respecteren wij uw persoonlijke levenssfeer. Als de resultaten van de studie gepubliceerd worden, dan worden de gegevens die we van u verzamelen gepseudonimiseerd: alle gegevens die u rechtstreeks zouden kunnen identificeren (bv. uw naam, werkplaats, functie, ...) uit het databestand worden geschrapt. Alle participanten krijgen een uniek nummer in de plaats. Daarnaast worden ook maatregelen genomen om onrechtstreekse identificatie te vermijden (bv. door heel concrete unieke elementen die u vermeldde in het interview).

Wat gebeurt er met de gegevens?

De opnames van de interviews zullen woord voor woord worden uitgeschreven en geanalyseerd. De elektronische versies (*transcripts*) zullen aan de Universiteit Gent worden bewaard op een PC beschermd met een paswoord. De bevindingen zullen worden neergeschreven in mijn masterproef en kunnen later ook naar andere onderzoekers worden gecommuniceerd voor eventuele academische publicaties. Het is ook mogelijk dat de resultaten voor het brede publiek bekend zullen worden gemaakt via lezingen en bijdragen in de media. Alle informatie over participanten zal daarbij geanonimiseerd zijn.

Wie heeft toegang tot mijn gegevens?

Het onderzoeksteam heeft toegang tot de opnames en de *transcripts*. In elk geval zullen alle persoonlijke gegevens en alle informatie die mogelijk naar u kan leiden uit de *interviewtranscripts* worden weggelaten.

Kan ik de resultaten van de studie inkijken?

U kan een kopie van de samenvatting van de resultaten ontvangen indien u dat wenst. U kan me hiervoor contacteren via het mailadres onderaan dit document.

Contact voor verdere informatie

Ik wil u hartelijk bedanken voor het lezen van deze informatie en voor uw interesse in mijn onderzoek. Ik wil ook nog eens benadrukken dat het belangrijk is dat ik veel verschillende mensen aan het woord kan laten om zo een algemeen beeld te krijgen van de situatie. U kan dus meewerken aan dit onderzoek ongeacht uw mening over de situatie of de sterkte van uw mening.

Indien u zou willen meewerken aan dit onderzoek of u nog wat extra informatie wilt, kan u mij steeds bereiken via e-mail: laurence.balliu@ugent.be of via het volgende telefoonnummer: +32 470 840 693.

Alvast heel erg bedankt voor uw interesse,

Met vriendelijke groeten,
Laurence Balliu

13.3. Informed consent form

Betreft: masterproefonderzoek naar communicatie 3M gedurende de PFOS-crisis

Beste meneer/ mevrouw,
Beste inwoner van Zwijndrecht,

In het kader van een masterproef binnen de richting Meertalige Communicatie aan de Universiteit van Gent wordt momenteel een onderzoek gevoerd naar crisiscommunicatie. Het onderzoek gaat verschillende aspecten na van de communicatie van 3M rond het PFOS-schandaal. Daartoe worden omwonenden in Zwijndrecht bevroegd over hun ervaringen met de PFOS-vervuiling en de crisiscommunicatie van 3M.

De afgelopen jaren werd in wetenschappelijk onderzoek heel wat aandacht besteed aan crisiscommunicatie. Onderzoek ging na hoe organisaties in crisis het best communiceren met het brede publiek. Er werd echter nog niet veel aandacht besteed aan hoe organisaties in crisis het best communiceren met betrokkenen. In dit onderzoek wil ik de theorie toepassen op een actuele case: het PFOS-schandaal van 3M. Ik wil nagaan op welke manier 3M communiceerde met omwonenden en hoe diezelfde omwonenden tegenover die communicatie staan. Deze informatie wordt verzameld door middel van diepte-interviews met inwoners van Zwijndrecht die in een straal van 5km rond de 3M fabriek wonen. Op die manier wil ik enerzijds toevoegen aan de theorie omtrent crisiscommunicatie. Anderzijds kan het onderzoek bedrijven met een gelijkaardige crisis helpen om te bepalen welke communicatie stakeholders verwachten en welke communicatie nodig of net niet nodig is.

Het onderzoek zelf bestaat uit een éénmalig interview. Door middel van open vragen peilen we naar uw visie en ervaring. U krijgt de kans om te antwoorden in uw eigen woorden. Het interview zelf beslaat maximum een uur van uw tijd. Om de gegevens goed en juist te kunnen verwerken, wordt het interview opgenomen.

Alle gegevens die in het kader van het onderzoek verzameld worden, worden volstrekt vertrouwelijk behandeld. Uw gegevens worden met andere woorden niet doorgegeven aan derden. Indien het verzamelde materiaal verwerkt wordt in een (academische) publicatie, wordt uw **anonimiteit** verzekerd (uw naam wordt niet vermeld, eventuele fragmenten uit het interview worden anoniem gepresenteerd).

Deelname aan het interview is volledig **vrijwillig**. U heeft op elk moment van het interview de mogelijkheid om uw deelname stop te zetten, zonder dat u daar een reden voor moet opgeven.

FORMULIER VOOR GEÏNFORMEERDE TOESTEMMING

Ik, ondergetekende, bevestig hierbij dat ik

1.	De informatie over het onderzoek heb gelezen en begrepen. Ik heb de gelegenheid gehad om de informatie en mijn deelname te overwegen en vragen te stellen die naar mijn tevredenheid werden beantwoord.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	Begrijp dat mijn deelname aan dit onderzoek geheel vrijwillig is en dat ik mijn deelname op elk moment tijdens het interview kan stopzetten zonder dat ik hiervoor een reden moet opgeven.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	Begrijp dat ik bij stopzetting van mijn deelname aan dit onderzoek, mijn reeds verzamelde gegevens kan terugtrekken tot 7 dagen na het interview. Een eenvoudige e-mail of telefoon naar de onderzoeker volstaat hiervoor. Ik hoef geen reden op te geven voor de terugtrekking van mijn gegevens.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	Begrijp dat stopzetting van mijn deelname geen enkele invloed zal hebben op mijn relatie met de Universiteit Gent	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	Begrijp dat ik geen financiële compensatie zal ontvangen voor mijn deelname aan dit onderzoek.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	Toestemming geef aan de onderzoekers om het interview op te nemen (audio-opname).	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	Begrijp dat de data die wordt verzameld gedurende deze studie zal worden verwerkt in overeenstemming met de wettelijke bepalingen en de informatie die mij werd verstrekt.	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.	Ervan op de hoogte ben dat ik een samenvatting van de onderzoeksresultaten kan krijgen.	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	Hierbij toestemming geef aan de onderzoekers om de onderzoeksresultaten op basis van de informatie die ik verstrek, te publiceren in wetenschappelijke tijdschriften en te bespreken tijdens wetenschappelijke bijeenkomsten op voorwaarde dat mijn identiteit daarbij niet achterhaald kan worden.	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	Ermee instem deel te nemen aan het onderzoek	<input type="checkbox"/>

U ontvangt als deelnemer een exemplaar van dit toestemmingsformulier.

De deelnemer:

Naam	Datum	Handtekening

Indien u een samenvatting van de resultaten wenst, gelieve hieronder een (e-mail)adres op te geven waarop u deze samenvatting wenst te ontvangen:

--

De persoon die toestemming vraagt:

Naam	Datum	Handtekening
Laurence Balliu	16-02-2022	

Naam en contactgegevens van de onderzoeker(s):

Indien u graag meer informatie wenst over het onderzoek, of indien u opmerkingen heeft over het onderzoek, kan u zich in de eerste plaats wenden tot de masterstudent die het onderzoek uitvoert Laurence Balliu, op volgend telefoonnummer: +32 470 840 693 of via mail laurence.balliu@ugent.be. Indien u verder vragen heeft hieromtrent kan u zich ook wenden tot de promotor van deze masterproef, prof. dr. An-Sofie Claeys via mail ansofie.claeys@ugent.be.

13.4. Predetermined topic list

Zelf te noteren voordien of kort na het interview:

- Datum gesprek
- Geslacht geïnterviewde
- Adres geïnterviewde
- Kijken via google maps wat de afstand is van de woonplaats tot de fabriek en noteren.

1. Inleiding:

Eerst en vooral bedankt voor uw tijd. Zoals u weet zal het interview maximum een uurtje duren. We zullen het samen hebben over de PFOS-vervuiling in Zwijndrecht en de communicatie van 3M omtrent dat schandaal. U kan mij vertellen over wat uw ervaringen zijn met het hele gebeuren. Ik sta open voor alle antwoorden, maar liefst praten we natuurlijk specifiek over de communicatie van het bedrijf 3M en minder over eventuele gebeurtenissen of reacties van de Vlaamse overheid of OVAM bijvoorbeeld.

Voordat we beginnen, zullen we deze “Informed Consent Form” samen even overlopen. Dit is een document dat bevestigt dat u op de hoogte bent van het onderzoek en er vrijwillig aan meewerkt. Op elk moment kan u het interview beëindigen en beslissen om niet meer mee te werken. Hierin staat ook dat ik uw gegevens vertrouwelijk zal verwerken en dat uw anonimiteit verzekerd wordt. + tekenen “Informed Consent Form”

2. Openingsvragen:

- Hoe oud bent u?
- Wat is uw gezinssituatie?
- Hoe lang woont u hier al? Bent u in Zwijndrecht geboren en getogen?
- Hebt u steeds graag gewoond in Zwijndrecht?

3. Centrale gespreksonderwerpen:

De eerste vragen die ik wil stellen gaan over uw persoonlijke ervaringen met de PFOS-vervuiling.

- Wat vindt u zelf over de PFOS-vervuiling door 3M? Ervaart u hierdoor zelf, naar uw aanvoelen, schade? Zo ja, op welke manier (bv. schade aan uw gezondheid, waarde van de woning, ...)
- Hoe ernstig vindt u zelf de schade die aan u als omwonende wordt berokkend door deze crisis? Hoe zwaar tilt u hieraan?
- Wat schrikt u het meest af in verband met de PFOS-vervuiling, welk aspect weegt voor u, als omwonende, het zwaarst door?

Vervolgens wil ik het hebben over de communicatie die 3M tot nu toe heeft gevoerd hierover. Het gaat dus om wat 3M heeft gecommuniceerd, niet om wat is gezegd door andere partijen zoals bijvoorbeeld de Vlaamse overheid of OVAM.

- Heeft 3M naar u en andere omwonenden gecommuniceerd over deze crisis? Hoe dan?
 - o Zijn er nog andere manieren waarop 3M naar u heeft gecommuniceerd?
 - o Was deze communicatie specifiek gericht naar omwonenden of naar het brede publiek?
 - o Via welke kanalen heeft u die communicatie ontvangen: was dat via brief, via het internet, op een infoavond, ...

*(Hier genoeg op **doorvragen**. Als ze één ding hebben verteld, vragen of er nog andere manieren zijn waarop 3M heeft gecommuniceerd. Daarna hetzelfde, enz. Tot ze niks nieuws meer kunnen vertellen hierover. Bovendien vragen naar zowel de kanalen waarlangs men heeft gecommuniceerd hierover als inhoudelijk, wat heeft men gezegd?)*

- Verschilt de manier waarop 3M heeft gecommuniceerd over de PFOS-vervuiling ten aanzien van het brede publiek enerzijds en de omwonenden anderzijds?
 - o Heeft u communicatie ontvangen die specifiek gericht was naar u als omwonende?
- Heeft 3M proactief gecommuniceerd naar de omwonenden, of hebben jullie veel nieuws via andere bronnen vernomen? Welke dan?
 - o Wanneer vernam u het nieuws van de PFOS-vervuiling?
 - o Bent u zelf actief opzoek gegaan naar informatie rond de situatie?
 - o De communicatie die u ontving van 3M, was dat nadat u het nieuws al had gehoord via een andere bron?
- Heeft 3M de nodige verantwoordelijkheid opgenomen voor de crisis? Waarom vindt u van wel/niet?
 - o Heeft 3M zich ooit verontschuldigd?
 - o Heeft 3M duidelijke plannen gecommuniceerd om de situatie aan te pakken?
 - o Nam 3M in haar communicatie duidelijk verantwoordelijkheid op?
Kwam die oprecht over voor u als omwonende?
- Vindt u de communicatie van 3M authentiek genoeg? Waarom wel/niet?

Authentiek =?

Authenticiteit is een begrip dat veel verschillende invullingen kan hebben. Het gaat vooral over de eerlijkheid, transparantie en de consistentie van het bedrijf. Andere belangrijke aspecten van authenticiteit zijn betrouwbaarheid en verantwoordelijkheid. Bijvragen die ik zou kunnen stellen zijn: Komt de communicatie overeen met de waarden van het bedrijf? Komt het bedrijf eerlijk over? Lijkt 3M transparant de communiceren over de gebeurtenissen? Lijkt 3M betrouwbaar als informatiebron?

- Denkt u dat 3M doorheen de crisis eerlijk is geweest in de communicatie over het PFOS-schandaal? Waarom wel/niet? Wanneer wel/niet?
 - o Kan u benoemen welke aspecten de communicatie van 3M eerlijk/ niet eerlijk doen overkomen bij u?

- Hoe voelt u zich bij de communicatie die 3M heeft voorzien of net niet voorzien?

EXTRA:

Heeft u zelf ooit een bericht over het PFOS-schandaal gepost of gedeeld op uw persoonlijke sociale media (bv. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)? Om wat voor bericht(en) ging dit en waarom heeft u die gepost of gedeeld?

Dan zou ik u ook willen vragen naar wat 3M volgens u had moeten doen, wat eventueel beter had gekund in de communicatie naar de omwonenden toe.

- Hoe vindt u dat 3M idealiter tot nu toe had moeten communiceren naar omwonenden toe over het PFOS-schandaal? Zowel op vlak van kanaal (bv. via een informatievergadering, via mail, via brief) als inhoudelijk (wat had 3M moeten zeggen).
 - o Wat had u verwacht van een bedrijf dat betrokken is bij een dergelijk schandaal?
 - o Had u graag een verontschuldiging gekregen van 3M?
 - o Had u meer informatie gewild omtrent een plan van aanpak om de crisis op te lossen?
 - o Indien u als omwonende geen communicatie kreeg, wat voor communicatie had u dan verwacht of gewild? Via welk kanaal had 3M die communicatie best verstuurd? Wanneer had u deze communicatie verwacht?

Tot slot wil ik u vragen naar de toekomstige communicatie van 3M.

- Hoe vindt u dat 3M in de toekomst verder zou moeten communiceren naar omwonenden toe op vlak van kanaal en inhoud?
 - o Wat zijn uw verwachtingen voor de toekomst?
 - o Wat zou het bedrijf moeten zeggen én/of doen om u genoegdoening te geven wat deze crisis betreft?
 - o Zou een verontschuldiging waardevol zijn voor u als omwonende?
 - o Wat kan 3M beter doen bij een gelijkaardige crisis in de toekomst?
 - o Moest u advies kunnen geven aan een ander bedrijf in een gelijkaardige situatie, wat zouden voor u de bouwstenen zijn van goede communicatie (openheid, transparantie, proactieve communicatie, kanalen, ...?)

4. Slot/ afsluiting:

- Is er nog iets dat u zelf zou willen toevoegen?
- Kent u nog iemand die ook geïnteresseerd zou zijn om mee te werken aan mijn onderzoek? Misschien iemand uit uw buurt?

Hartelijk dank voor het interessante gesprek en uw hulp bij het onderzoek. Indien u nog iets wil toevoegen aan ons gesprek van vandaag of vragen hebt omtrent mijn verwerking van uw interview, dan kan u mij nog steeds bereiken via mijn e-mail adres of telefoonnummer.

13.5. Example of an interview transcription*

O = onderzoeker

R = respondent

O	Eerst en vooral, bedankt voor uw tijd. (euhm) Zoals u weet zal het interview maximaal een uurtje duren. (euhm)
R	Oké.
O	We gaan het samen hebben over de PFOS-vervuiling en vooral dan uw ervaringen rond het hele gebeuren. (euhm). Ik zou het natuurlijk ... Ik sta natuurlijk open voor alle antwoorden, maar ik zou het liefst hebben over de communicatie van 3M specifiek en iets minder over de gebeurtenissen in de Vlaamse Overheid of binnen OVAM. Oké?
R	Ja. Ja.
O	Ik heb gisteren uw getekend informed consent formulier gekregen.
R	Ja. Ik dacht, ik zal het al eens invullen. Is dat voldoende?
O	Tuurlijk. Heeft u alles begrepen?
R	Ja.
O	Heeft u daar nog vragen over?
R	Nee.
O	U mag steeds het onderzoek stopzetten. Dat is belangrijk, dat ik dat nog eens herhaal. Ook als er vragen zijn waar u niet wil op reageren, dan zegt u dat maar en dan ga ik door naar de volgende. Oké?
R	Ja.
O	Goed. Mag ik vragen hoe oud u bent? Dat is soms een moeilijke vraag...
R	Ik ben (euhm ... euhm) 61 nu.
O	Oké.
R	Ja, ik moest even rekenen.
O	Woont u al heel uw leven in Zwijndrecht?

R	Nee, nee. Ik heb (euhm) ... ik woon nu in Zwijndrecht van 2009, ja.
O	En altijd graag gewoond, in Zwijndrecht?
R	Ja.
O	Is dat veranderd nu, met het PFOS-schandaal?
	...

** The signed informed consent forms and full transcripts of the interviews are accessible through the supervisor of this master's thesis, An-Sofie Claeys. Interested parties can get into contact via e-mail: ansofie.claeys@ugent.be.