

## ARAMCO's Online Communication Strategies in Time of Crisis: An Examination of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Siraj T. Degnah<sup>1</sup> and Sharea M. Albogami<sup>1,\*</sup>

*Public Relations Department, Faculty of Media and Communication, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.*

*Emails [salbogami@kau.edu.sa](mailto:salbogami@kau.edu.sa)*

### **Abstract**

*This study aims at examining how ARAMCO employed digital platforms to manage the terrorist attack crisis in 2019. It examined the company's online communication strategies in light of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). The study adopted the qualitative approach by analyzing ARAMCO's digital platforms: Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, and its website on the internet. The total number of ARAMCO's posts on its digital platforms was 185 posts during the period from 13/6/2019 until 30/12/2019. Twitter ranked first among the platforms used by the company, followed by its official website, while youtube ranked last. The study found that ARAMCO dealt with the crisis in a scientific methodological manner where it used 11 online communication strategies which are in conformity with the SCCT strategies. The study showed that the company adopted 3 other strategies not mentioned in the theory. The study found that ARAMCO's communication messages for managing the crisis at its first 3 stages were asynchronous with the crisis lifecycle. However, it used the communication strategies which are adequate for each stage. The study showed that the non-Arabic communication messages varied to suit the nature of the audience in various countries.*

**Keywords:** ARAMCO, communication, Crisis, strategies.

### **I. Introduction**

Crisis management comes on top of the vital topics in this world due to the highly complicated variables and events seen by the contemporary international order. Crisis management topic has become one of the very important topics in our current age. Crises become more serious if they weren't contained and curbed. Hence, they should be addressed or dealt with using various scientific and methodological techniques. With the accelerating development of technology, it became necessary to depend on scientific online communication strategies and methodologies to confront and control crises for avoidance of negative results and achievement of positive results. Crisis communication and initial response play a crucial role in managing crises, as they provide information, evaluate the event and bring more control over organization of information flow. They further frame the crisis and convey the organization's attitude to the various audiences. Once the organization is affected by a crisis, various audiences and stakeholders become eager to know more details and information about such crisis. Absence of such information from the official sources of the organization gives rise to rumors which threaten the reputation of the organizations. This underlines the importance of providing correct information for the public quickly at the times of crises.

In the context of crises which worth to be studied, on 14 September 2019, ARAMCO – one of the major international companies in the field of energy-suffered vandalizing terrorist attacks on a number of its facilities in the eastern region of the Kingdom; namely, Khorais and Abqaiq by a number of drones and cruise missiles. Later, the terrorist Al- Houthigroup claimed responsibility for this attack. This terrorist attack caused a number of major fires and caused serious damage to the infrastructure, which resulted in suspension of extraction and production of oil and gas in both regions. The latter is considered

the largest oil refinery in the world. According to a report by Reuters, the attack caused halt of 50% of the Company's total production of crude oil; which constitutes 5% of the total international production of oil and 50% of the total company's production of natural gas. This caused severe confusion in the energy markets and international financial markets, as well as an unprecedented hike in oil prices by more than 20% [1]. The crisis attracted the attention of the international community which denounced the terrorist attacks.

While the vandalizing or terroristic attack on oil facilities is one of the major crises which may be faced by the organizations, we rarely find that public relations and crisis communications are studied for this type of crises, especially in light of the SCCT and *via* social networks. Hence, this study aims at identifying the crises communication methods used by ARAMCO after the vandalizing and terrorist attack on it, *via* analyzing the Company's messages, especially that the Company is one of the major multi-national oil companies which has impacts on the national and international level, and *via* examining the communication strategies in light of the SCCT model and applying them to a facility of highly security-sensitive nature and amid highly sensitive political circumstances.

**Thus, this study aims at replying to the following questions:**

1. How does ARAMCO use digital platforms in crisis management?
2. To what extent do ARAMCO's accounts on social networks apply the SCCT strategies?

### **Previous literature**

Previous studies aimed at examining the communication strategies in managing crises *via* addressing one case or a number of cases for organizations which faced crises, and comparing them in order to find the best methods and strategies for facing crises. Crises are defined as vague events which overwhelm the organization, threaten its interests, and expose it to substantial material or moral losses. Crises also may lead to undesirable or desired results, as crises may be a juncture for a better status if it can be benefited from [2]. Crises are, in nature, serious moments which may constitute a turning point in the life or an organization; however, it may create opportunities that might lead the Company to be stronger than it was before facing such crisis [3]. Previous studies found that preparation for crises is necessary. This preparation is to be made via planning, early prediction, and underlining the importance of initial response in cases of crises. Furthermore, the organization's good communication and efficiency of its employees play an important role in managing and overcoming the crisis.

### **Crisis planning**

Strategic planning mitigates the crisis effects and recovery [4]. The more the organization works in light of scientific and methodological plans, the more it becomes capable to predict crises and deal well with them when they occur [5]. This is *via* identifying the points of weakness and being aware of the predicted risks, such as identifying the risks of the organization's location; i.e. knowing whether or not it is exposed to natural disasters or terrorist attacks for example, determining a command and control center for the crises, reviewing the internal and external communication systems, and communicating with stakeholders, in addition to media planning for the crisis, as its absence makes the organization unable to correctly manage and overcome the crisis [6].

Organization's public relations participate in the crisis forecasting process [7], as the pre-crisis stage is divided into 3 stages: The stage of investigating signals, which means collecting and analyzing information and identifying the risk sources; then the stage of prevention or mitigation which is the stage of making corrective measures and responding to the initial signals; and the stage of crisis preparation which is identifying the points of weakness, appointing the crisis team, choosing the spokesperson, and

expecting the type of the crisis [8]. The study of Al-Hana [9] mentioned that the institution's task doesn't end at planning for overcoming crises but goes beyond that to include good execution and effective control for managing crises. Furthermore, crises should be dealt with using great caution and intelligence for mitigating and curbing the crisis, as well as developing future strategies for dealing with the emerging or potential risks and finding early solutions [10].

Though organizations can't plan for all crises, they can plan for major or big crises [8]. Absence of strategic planning for crises in organizations makes them lose their vital and effective role in managing crises[11]. This makes organizations randomly deal with crises in an unorganized manner; which causes them to lose control and be unable to manage the crises, especially during the amid-crisis stage [12].

In this study, despite the fact that it is difficult to predict a terrorist attack on the facilities of ARAMCO, but this is foreseeable for 2 reasons: The first is historical, as the Company was hit by a terrorist attack in May of the same year. The second reason is the position and sensitivity of ARAMCO for the State, as it is one of the most important resources of the State and the largest oil company in the world. Hence, in light of the current political conditions, ARAMCO and its facilities are targeted. This is considered a point of weakness according to Coombs, as the position can be a point of weakness, whether the geographical position if it is vulnerable for natural disasters, or the economic and political positions related to the State. Hence, estimating the sensitivity of the organization and its connection to national security or politics is the first required preparation step.

## **Response Strategies**

Response strategies seek protecting the reputation of the organization. Good choice of the suitable strategy for response while identifying the responsibility for the crisis is one of the most important matters for dealing with crises once they occur [13]. Previous studies divided crisis response based on the SCCT into two types: Initial response and secondary response.

Initial response can be defined as the response shown once the crisis occurs. It requires framing the crisis by identifying those responsible for the crisis for the purpose of choosing a suitable strategy for response. Identifying those responsible for the crisis is one of the most important matters in dealing with crisis, as it is related to the potential reactions of the audience and the feelings related to the various reactions and the subsequent decisions that will be taken by the audience towards the Company, i.e. the behavioral intentions. This means that the more the organization is responsible for the crisis, the more negative reactions are likely to be shown by the audience, which are connected to the feelings of wrath and anger which may sometimes turn into gloating in cases of default of the organization. Hence, the organization should evaluate responsibility and show how far it is responsible for the crisis. On the other hand, the Abdullatif[14]study found that the organization's claim of responsibility for the crisis is a positive strategy which results in sympathy from the public and positively impacts their attitudes and behavioral intentions towards the organization. One example of that is the crisis of the American University in Cairo in 2017. Ulmer's study concurs with the previous study that showing how far the organization is responsible for the crisis is one of the most prominent positive factors which affect the audience's emotions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions towards the organization. The strategy of claiming responsibility may be feasible if compared to some other strategies. This was found clear in monitoring and analyzing the role of communications in dealing with the crisis in 3 different crises [15].

According to Coombs' theory, initial response adopts one of the following strategies: denial, apology, underestimation, or reconstruction (compensation). Choice of the suitable strategy depends on the type, volume, nature, and seriousness of the crisis [16]. The "quick apology" strategy for managing crises has a positive impact on the organization's audience. This may enable the organization to overcome the audience's negative reaction [17]. The full apology strategy positively affects the audience's trust and loyalty towards the organization. JanicicandRankovic[18] considers this strategy as the best strategy.

Salem and Al-Khatat[16]said that the underestimation strategy is the second step after apology. Coombs' last strategy, known as the reconstruction strategy, is one of the most effective initial response strategies during crises, as it is the corrective measures strategy [19]. Denial strategy is the most difficult strategy in terms of application because it involves the risk of losing the trust and loyalty of the audience; hence, this strategy can't be used with aware and active audiences [17].

The study of Al-Nagi[20] introduced a new strategy known as "crisis re-routing" strategy. This strategy aims at dealing and coping with extremely violent crises that can't be faced or resisted, and then re-routing it to a number of secondary routes. It is one of the most important communication strategies, especially in crises for which the organization was responsible and for crises which endangered the health and safety of others, for example the crisis of drug factories in Jordan in 2012. The study of Al-Nagi[20] and Ghoul [21] indicates that the organization can use a mix of communication strategies at one time to manage the crisis. It is one of the most important foundations for putting an end to a crisis [22]. Accordingly, the organization's failure to choose the suitable communication option would negatively affect its reputation [20]. There is a clear positive effect for using modern communication strategies for managing crises [23]. Continuous research is also necessary for finding the best ways and strategies for responding to crises [24]. This is the aim of this study.

The secondary response is intended for stakeholders. It aims at promoting and supporting the initial response strategies. It focuses on reminding stakeholders of its good past, on honoring stakeholders, on reminding them of the good work, and on explaining that the facility is a victim of the crisis [13].

### **Efficiency of Employees**

Efficient human resources are one of the main elements for managing crises. The existence of experienced employees who have individual and cognitive skills for dealing with crises positively impacts management of the crises. The study of Amer[25] affirmed the importance of existence of specialized sections equipped with highly efficient human resources who undergo continuous training and development on all modern methods for managing crises, as well as the focus on developing their capabilities to deal with technical and technological devices on a continuous and permanent basis [26]. The study of Ayyad [23] indicates that the banks' success in managing marketing crises is attributed to the efficiency of their employees. It is found that 85% of the organizations' employees got training or training courses on crisis management. Deficiency and failure in training employees on crisis management make them weaker in dealing with and managing crises [20].

### **Communication Efficiency**

The study of Ulmer [14] indicates that the efficiency and consistency of communications is one of the most prominent positive elements which affect the emotions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions of the audience towards the organization. Availability of information is one of the main causes for achieving efficiency of communications in confronting institutional crises by making the information available for the organization's audience and decision makers to face the crisis [27]. The study of Al-Samani [6] and Barghout [7]underlinesthe importance of focusing on knowledge and information management amid the crisis. Weak communication coordination amid the crisis makes the organization incapable of managing crisis correctly. Modern communication methods should be used for conveying the correct information for the audience [28].

Social networks are considered one of the best communication methods which connect the organization to its audience during crises. The organization can use the interactive features of social networks by providing the largest amount of information for various audiences [29], as the absence of specialized divisions, plans, or strategies for managing the contents of the interactive platforms makes the organization deal with such platforms with one-way communications and, consequently, it loses the

important interactive feature of social networks, especially at the times of crises [12]. Interactive capabilities of social networks can be also clearly employed on the website of the organization for communicating with clients [30]. The findings of the study of Lianshan [17] mentioned that the role of influencers on social networks is very important in channeling the views of the public. The public accepted the excuses of the organization and actively interacted with them when influencers published the apology on social networks, and negatively interacted with the organizations which denied their responsibility for the crises. The study of Adebayo [31] affirmed the importance of combining both traditional communication strategies and social networks as a part of its other communication channels to communicate with the audience during the crisis lifetime. The study of Salem and Al-Khatat [15] adds that the dialogue strategy is one of the most important proactive communication strategies which aim at making information available for stakeholders and involving them in decision-making. This strategy can be used amid or after the crisis.

Theunissen's study differs from previous studies, as it concluded that organizations may exacerbate the crisis in case of using (interactive) social networks to reply to the public and to provide information either from those affected with the crisis or others. However, it accepted interaction and response on an individual basis for persons who experienced the crisis and stated that the crisis can be solved and ended in this way. It concluded that applying traditional strategies in communication may exacerbate the public opinion, while modern communication methods which provide correct information for the public must be used [28].

### **Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)**

The SCCT traces its roots back to the Attribution Theory. Coombs mentioned that the public search for the causes which led to this crisis, especially if these events were negative or unexpected. This results in people's emotional interaction with the crisis, which reflects on the organization's reputation and future.

The theory was keen on focusing on the rule of prediction and forecasting. Prediction of the harms that might be caused to the organization and its reputation, as well as prediction of the possible results are the main driver of decision-making during the crisis in order to limit its damage and choose the best strategy to deal with it. This rule guides us to identify the main aspects of the impact of the crisis on the organization's reputation and responsibility towards it. It also helps us to understand how stakeholders responded to the crisis and to care for communication and post-crisis outreach.

In his theory, Coombs focused on the importance of evaluating and knowing to what extent the stakeholders believe that there is a default from the organization resulted in the crisis. If the public is aware that the organization is wrong, the risks to the organization's reputation will be put as a priority and the organization shall bear the responsibility. Coombs considers that the responsibility for the crisis is the cornerstone and the most threatening to the organization's reputation. The manager of the organization must first identify the type of the crisis which will be faced by its organization via framing the crisis [32]. The SCCT depends, in terms crisis management, on 3 main areas: Initial response to the crisis, responsibility for the crisis, and the organization's history with crises [8].

The theory affirms the importance of the existence of a manager for the crisis who cares for crisis reaction strategies, and level of responsibility and reputation threatening resulting from the crisis. Coombs noted 3 factors would help crisis managers to expect the level of threat to the organization's reputation and expectations of how the public would view the organization and its responsibility for the crisis. These factors are: Evaluating the type of crisis, history of the crisis, and previous reputation of the organization. General safety, financial loss, and loss of reputation are among the most prominent threateners to the organization's reputation. Coombs divided the life of crisis into 3 connected, consequent, and consistent stages for managing the crisis. It begins with the pre-crisis stage which focuses on developing plans and

forming and training a team to manage the crisis. There is another amid-crisis stage or crisis-response stage which was divided by Coombs into 2 phases: First phase, initial response to crises. Second phase is the secondary response or the phase of repairing reputation and behavioral intentions. The last stage is known as post-crisis stage which was defined by Coombs as the stage at which the organization recovers [33].

Based on the foregoing, Coombs - the founder of the SCCT – considers that crisis management requires using the most suitable strategy for dealing with it. That strategy must be commensurate with the magnitude of the crisis and the expected effects. He also noted that the public search for the reasons which led to the crisis, especially if such events are negative or unforeseeable, and that the responsibility for the crisis is the cornerstone and the major threatener to the organization's reputation. Since this study aims at investigating the strategies which are to be used before, during, and after the crisis, it used the SCCT as its reference frame to make sure of the adoption of these strategies.

## 2. Methods and Data Collection

This study sheds light on how the organizations' digital platforms can be used to manage crises which hit facilities of high security importance and sensitivity in light of the SCCT. The qualitative inductive analysis of data was used to reply to the study questions, which is considered one of the methods for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use [34]. It allows researchers to reach a deep and thorough understanding of the Company's communication strategies to deal with crises using digital platforms, in addition to investigating ARAMCO's unique communication practices on these platforms.

The researchers applied the content qualitative analysis using a systematic process to code and classify the data taken from various resources. The latent content analysis was used to extract the hidden meanings of the texts and the photo captions in Instagram. Analysis of the content underwent various stages which began with planning and choosing the analysis unit. A single tweet was considered an analysis unit for twitter and full comment in Instagram is considered the analysis unit, while the sentence or the answer of a question was considered the analysis unit in Youtube video clips. Finally, on websites, the paragraph (a group of lines) is deemed as the unit of analysis. The encoding process used the inductive approach for data at this stage.

To investigate how far ARAMCO used the strategies of Coombs' theories on its digital platforms, the researcher monitored the total frequencies of communication strategies published by ARAMCO. It is found that the total number of these frequencies is (226) frequencies. The total number of strategies was 11 strategies. Given the foregoing inputs, the researcher managed to calculate the percentage of each strategy and to know the levels of using communication strategies at each stage of ARAMCO's crisis. It should be noted that the variation of the frequency percentage of publishing of these strategies is attributed to the nature of the strategy itself. The variation of usage of the strategies doesn't necessarily mean that some strategies are more important than others. By investigating the frequencies of publication, it is found that the percentage of adoption of the community support strategy was 23.45% while the percentage of adoption of the employee training strategy was 3.1%. The reason behind the variation between the two percentages may be attributed to the nature of the strategy itself. It is very good for the organization to publish all the efforts, being few or many, exerted for supporting the society. However, the topics related to training of employees are a routine matter that might occur periodically and doesn't require frequent publications. Furthermore, publishing of such topics (training of employees) might not achieve the same results if compared to topics related to society support and environment protection for example.

In this study, time was not used as a criterion for dividing the 3 stages of the crisis as regards ARAMCO's accounts. This is because the time of publication on the internet doesn't reflect the nature of

the events. The appearance of texts and comments was asynchronous with the crisis life-cycle. Accordingly, the data was divided into 3 categories: data related to crisis preparation, data related to dealing with the crisis, and post-crisis stage, regardless to the time of publication. Unlike Coombs' model, the crisis life-cycle is divided in terms of the time criterion into 3 stages: pre-crisis stage, amid-crisis stage, and post-crisis stage. The pre-crisis stage was defined by Coombs by identifying its features that it occurs when some signs appear that an imminent crisis would occur. This stage was prepared for in ARAMCO prior to the crisis. However, most of these preparations were shared with the media at the time of the crisis. The second stage is the crisis-response stage which is defined in the Coombs model as the time of the crisis and the time of the initial events of the crisis. While on social networks, it was defined by Stewart that it appears when the event is addressed and appears on social networks. However, at early stages of the crisis at issue, ARAMCO didn't directly refer to the crisis on social networks. It was indirectly managed on the Company's website, which is a one-way communication method. The last stage is the post-crisis stage. It begins with the recovery from the crisis and the end of the events of the crisis.

### ARAMCO's Adoption and Use of Social Media Tools

By checking the social network accounts of ARAMCO, it is found that ARAMCO used 2 accounts in two main usages: First, to connect with the related parties, which was clear in publishing a multi-language content. Second, to publish content which suits the environment and nature of its audience at various countries, despite the fact that the Company doesn't adopt the direct response to the audience strategy. In its accounts, there were no replies to audience. However, at the same time, it can't be classified as a one-way communication. For example, it allocates a part of its account for the most popular news. It may indirectly respond in a tweet or a post but not in the form of replying to individuals. The content of such responses will be clarified and analyzed in the following part of the results.

Table No.(1) shows the number of posts and the percentage of ARAMCO's usage of each platform. The total number of ARAMCO's posts was 185 posts in the sample understudy. Twitter is the most used platform. ARAMCO published on Twitter about 54% of its total posts on the Internet during the period under study. It was followed by the website. Posts on the website accounted for one-third of the posts (32%), while YouTube came at the bottom of the list with the least usage by 4 posts only. ARAMCO's publications during the crisis decreased by approximately 70% than its publications before and after the September 2019 crisis. Below are the results of each platform.

**Table (1): ARAMCO's posts on social networks**

Platform Name	Total Number of Posts	Required Number	Dealing with Crisis	Post-Crisis
Twitter	100 tweets	43%	12%	45%
Instagram	21 Posts	52%	9.5%	38.5%
Youtube	4 Videos	50%	25%	25%
Official Website	60 Posts	38.5%	16.5%	45%
Total	185 Posts	42.7%	13.5%	43.8%

Twitter: Based on an analysis of the content of ARAMCO's Twitter accounts, it has three accounts: ARAMCO Company's account in Arabic, @Saudi\_ARAMCO; ARAMCO Company's account in English, @ARAMCO; and ARAMCOWa'ed's account @ARAMCOEC. Accounts can be divided into two types: First, two main multi-purpose ARAMCO's accounts, i.e. ARAMCO in Arabic and ARAMCO in English. Wa'ed's account can be classified as an account for community service and entrepreneur support. Accordingly, the content of the last account was excluded from this study.

The account of ARAMCO in Arabic on Twitter has 2 million followers, while in English, its followers exceeded 170 thousand followers. The high number of followers of the Company's account may reflect that Twitter users are looking to communicate with the Company or to obtain information from it. In the Company's Arabic account, it appears that it follows 35 accounts. These accounts are those of the Company and the related parties that have common interests with the Company. They are as follows: 11 accounts for companies and subsidiaries of ARAMCO parent company, such as Yasref Corporation; 5 companies for stakeholders, such as Chevron which has an agreement to run 50% of the kingdom's hydrocarbon resources until 2039; and 19 accounts for governmental agencies and ministries. This indicates that ARAMCO is interested in what is published on the accounts of stakeholders and retweets some posts of the followed accounts. The Company's English account does not follow any accounts. One of its communication policies on Twitter is its commitment to post each tweet in both Arabic and English on both its Arabic and English accounts. Hence, the content of the two accounts is largely identical.

In general, the Company publishes all recent news, information, statistics, and agreements related to the Company, as well as the achievements of the Company and international and global conferences wherein ARAMCO participated. It also publishes a lot of information related to the efficiency of the infrastructure owned by the Company, and praises the quality of the performance of its employees and workers. The Company tends to publish texts supported by pictures and videos on its Twitter account, which constitutes the higher percentage of its posts compared to other forms of content. The Company is committed to periodically publish the numbers which show the progress of its works at all levels. In the field of social work, it publishes its commitment and contribution to preservation of environment via carbon dioxide treatment project. For example

“To protect natural ecosystems, we continue to plant mangrove trees, the 2.2 million that we already planted will absorb approximately 4 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub> over their lifetime, the equivalent of emissions by 820 thousand cars”

In its key business field, it publishes numbers indicating the value of company's profits at various periods and the amounts of oil poured into the international oil market.

#### **Official Website:**

ARAMCO publishes a lot of news and information about the Company, its business, and its investments on its official website: [saudiARAMCO.com](http://saudiARAMCO.com). However, ARAMCO's communication policy for the website is characterized by: addressing each group of its audience separately, as its website was designed in nine versions; each copy pertains to a specific geographical area which has different common interests with ARAMCO. It has (ARAMCO Saudi Arabia website, ARAMCO America, ARAMCO India, ARAMCO China, ARAMCO Europe, ARAMCO Singapore, ARAMCO Japan, ARAMCO Korea, and ARAMCO Malaysia). Users can navigate between these various versions. ARAMCO publishes news and topics related to the specific country or geographical region, and its news varies in each version between English and the mother tongue of that region. Furthermore, each version is characterized by diversity of its content which is classified per the targeted audience. For example, there are tabs for investors, potential customers, suppliers, and community members. Under each tab, there is news of interest to the targeted group. In addition, the home page contains general news and the most popular news. It also gives more details than the news published on social media networks.

#### **Instagram:**

ARAMCO published 21 photos with captions in the period under study. These photos are related to ARAMCO's primary activity and development of its business, as well as its activities related to its social responsibility.



## YouTube:

ARAMCO's YouTube channel has 68,800 subscribers. It has 5 main tabs (lists) based on the language of the video, as its channel speaks Arabic, English, Mandarin, Chinese, Japanese and Korean. However, the last post in the Korean language was three years ago, as the Korean content is the least viewed, followed by the Chinese and Japanese content which ceased two years ago. It continued publishing the most viewed content: Arabic and English. All this may indicate that the Company is reviewing its communication strategies with various audiences to determine the best virtual platforms to reach out such audiences, as the Company kept communications with the various audiences on its website in all languages.

## ARAMCO's communication strategies across digital platforms during the 2019 crisis life-cycle

This study tested the SCCT on ARAMCO's digital platforms. It came up with a number of results. The most prominent among these results are: ARAMCO used 11 communication strategies that are suitable to the SCCT strategies, in addition to three strategies that were not mentioned in the SCCT, including community support strategy, openness to the media. It also communicates with audiences, including platform users, in general and stakeholders in particular.

## Communication strategies for the crisis preparation stage

This stage focuses on preparation for the crises and for managing them when they occur. In general, this stage requires forecasting, checking for initial signs of crises and building a good reputation via strong ties with stakeholders. Such strong ties are capable to make stakeholders more tolerant and receptive to crises when they occur. By analyzing the data, it became clear that the Company used various strategies to prepare for the crises. Such strategies were classified by the researcher into internal strategies for crisis preparation, and external strategies for crisis preparation. However, all these communication strategies aim at strengthening the Company's position and preparing for any expected or unexpected crisis, by supporting a number of strategies which established firmly the positive reputation of the Company among its various audiences.

## Internal strategies for crisis preparation

They refer to the strategies developed by the organization at the departmental level to prepare for crises. They include the strategies developed by Coombs as follows: Training and formation of the crisis management team, identifying the spokesperson, determining the communication channel with the relevant parties. Table (2) shows how far ARAMCO referred to the strategy it used to prepare for the crisis in its publication. In more than 65 posts, ARAMCO referred to topics related to its care for protecting the environment. In 53 posts, it referred to topics related to community support. In about 7 posts, it indicated the readiness of the crisis team. In 2 posts, it referred to the spokesperson. It indicated 3 times that it allocated a part of its official website as a source for the latest news on the crisis. All these strategies were prepared before the crisis, but they were clearly referred to and demonstrated during the crisis.

**Table (2) SCCT's Communication Strategies Used at the Crisis Preparation Stage**

Communication strategies used for preparation for the crisis	
Strategy	Frequency of Usage of the Strategy
1. Formation and training of the crisis management team	3.1%
2. Identifying the spokesperson of the organization	0.9%

3. Allocating a channel for communication with stakeholders	1.3%
4. Community support	23.45%
5. Environment protection	28.76%

### **Training and formation of a crisis management team:**

Prior to the crisis, ARAMCO cared for training its employees and raising their readiness to deal with sudden crises, most notably sudden fires or sudden accidents. ARAMCO published a number of tweets on its accounts explaining the previous efforts made in training and equipping its employees, as well as providing tools and infrastructure to help them to face and deal with any potential crises once they occur, and to know how to deal with such crisis, and how to distribute job duties to the work team, each according to their respective specialization. For example, it posted on Twitter:

“Our capability as the world’s leading reliable supplier is driven by our resilience and the dedication and proficiency of our people.” Amin H. Nasser, President & CEO.”

These preparations were only shared by the Company via the means of communication and were only made available to the public after the occurrence of the crisis. Thus, it appeared as a kind of response and not as a kind of preparation for the audience, and this may be due to the security sensitivity that may arise from posting pictures of work sites, because they may provide more information and details to the attackers.

### **Identifying the spokesperson of the Company:**

It is one of the strategies mentioned by the SCCT. The existence of a spokesperson achieves flow of information through official sources during the crises and, consequently, enables the organization to correctly manage the crisis. In ARAMCO, the CEO of the Company, Eng. Amin Al-Nasser, is the authorized person to speak to media. ARAMCO follows this policy even before the terrorist crisis. The president also appeared as a spokesman for the Company during the crisis. His duties include providing the audience of the organization with information and informing them of all the developments related to the crisis via traditional media, and issuing press releases signed in his name. This contributes to raising the quality of the information released to the media and increasing its credibility, with the potential of overcoming rumors and limiting the randomness of information conveyance, which may affect the way the crisis is managed.

### **The allocation of a channel to communicate with the stakeholders:**

The Company allocated a permanent e-mail for communication with the Company and to respond to inquiries at all times. However, during the crisis, an e-mail was allocated to reply to public inquiries, while the website was dedicated for updates and providing stakeholders with information on the Crisis

### **External strategies**

External strategies are divided into reputation building strategies via robustness of the product, subsequent services, and communications with stakeholders who have business dealings with the Company. These strategies were recommended by Coombs in his study. However, this study found that ARAMCO used another type of strategies, i.e. social service and environmental responsibility.

### **Community support:**

ARAMCO built bridges with the community via community partnerships and initiatives, as well as supporting entrepreneurs in every country and geographic region where ARAMCO operates. It largely showed this role via tweets accompanied with videos and photos, as well as on its website, in all its nine versions. It also showed its contributions to helping disaster survivors, literacy, skill development and scholarships. It shared all these projects on its website versions for each country and via Twitter account in both languages. For example, it organized the Young Leaders Advisory Board to benefit from the skills of the youth and give them some experience in Saudi Arabia and “ARAMCO Asia Youth program in Beijing”. It opened the volunteer unit and the student support program in Xiamen University for studying clean energy and entrepreneurship. The Company also referred to its community work in supporting local industries and local content, training future graduates, making donations to a number of charities and participating in dozens of other community initiatives

Tweet "The Young Leaders Advisory Board's mission is to provide solutions from the youth's perspective to achieve the Company's strategic goals" #WYSD2019

Website: "ARAMCO Korea was recognized by the Hope Bridge Korea Disaster Relief Association (Hope Bridge) for its contribution of KRW 1 billion (approximately USD 0.84 millions) to help curb the spread of COVID-19 in the country".

Protection of the environment: ARAMCO performed various environmental projects, ranging from tree planting, protection of some animal species from extinction, raising environmental awareness for members of society throughout the Kingdom and in all countries where ARAMCO carries out some work, as well as ARAMCO's endangered animal conservation program, as it created and supervised on the Shaybah reserve located near the Shaybah oil field.

"Our Shaybah Wildlife Sanctuary contributes to preserving the Arabian Oryx, sand gazelles and ostrich #Bio-diversity", during the period under study, it supported the program for protecting the bird species. Each of us contributes, in its own way, to preserving the environment and biodiversity. Learn about some of these methods."

It also mentioned that among its environmental projects and plans preservation of wildlife and the environment, by caring for a number of initiatives and programs, such as the program of planting millions of trees, using clean and environment-friendly energies. In addition, the ethical awareness of the Company appears in its efforts in a number of issues related to climate change, carbon emission reduction, and support of projects and researches which aim at trying to treat fumes and gases emitted as a result of petroleum industries and converting them into useful materials, such as a tree planting project in Houston. ARAMCO also initiated a number of various projects to protect the environment. This policy is a good one which can mitigate and absorb the anger of groups and campaigns calling for the protection of the environment, especially in some geographical areas where such groups are active and where ARAMCO carries out some energy-related work, such as America and Europe.

Tweet: "We are collaborating with the Saudi Wildlife Authority and @Smithsonian Institution to #SaveTheAsirMagpie from extinction, a mysterious #bird that is found only in #Saudi\_Arabia. Sadly, only around 100 pairs of Asir magpies remain".

Tweet: "To protect natural #ecosystems, we continue to plant #mangrove trees, the 2.2 million that we already planted will absorb approximately 4 million tons of #CO2 over their lifetime, the equivalent of emissions by 820 thousand cars"

### **Communication Strategies for the Crisis Management Stage**

The analysis of the data of the social media accounts at the crisis management phase revealed that ARAMCO used a number of communication strategies at the amid-crisis stage, starting with the initial response strategy followed by the crisis framing strategy, the informing provision strategy and the reputation management strategy, by reminding of the previous good relations of the organization, and the strategy of openness to the media. All these communication strategies help the Company to face and manage the crisis, and to overcome the challenges that arise to minimize the losses.

### **Initial response**

This strategy means how the Company's employees will deal with the crisis. It is a combination of all the measures and actions taken by the organization to overcome the crisis at the first moments of its occurrence. During the attacks (crisis), ARAMCO's employees made exceptional work in facing fires, and dealt with them in a professional and speedy manner. They managed to put fire out in record time, despite the seriousness and difficulty of dealing with fires resulting from oil explosions. Days after the crisis, the spokesperson made a press interview on his YouTube channel, in which he stated that the time of the crisis was not the easiest time to deal with the crisis due to the quiet nature of work at that time and the absence of all leaders at that time; however, employees demonstrated their ability to deal with the crisis.

“Early in the dawn there were no managers and few supervisors. However, each person in the organization worked in a professional manner and performed the required role perfectly and there was no need for any meetings to define the tasks, because everyone knows in advance what role they should play”.

Furthermore, the emergency shutdown systems, and the so-called smart field system played a role. The emergency shutdown systems mean the systems that have been provided in the infrastructure of all ARAMCO oil facilities. These systems operate automatically and can be remotely controlled to stop the flow and ejection of oil in emergency situations, such as fires, fractures, and leaking off oil pipelines. They had a great role in controlling fires and minimizing losses

### **Framing the crisis**

ARAMCO followed a systematic strategy for framing the crisis that can be divided into four steps: Defining the type of the crisis, identifying the parties involved in crisis management, organizing media appearance, and assessing the situation and determining the dimensions of the crisis.

First, Classification of the crisis: The September 2019 crisis is classified as a victim cluster. This is because ARAMCO is a victim of this crisis which didn't result from a default in its work. It is also classified as a (Malevolence) crisis according to Coombs' theory, since the fires were caused by drone attacks, which were later found to be terrorist attacks claimed by the Houthis in Yemen. Second: Due to the highly security-sensitive nature of ARAMCO's crisis, this crisis was managed in partnership with the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense which conducted investigations and took the required security measures and precautions. Third: Organization of the media appearance, so that the Ministry of Interior undertakes the management of everything related security in general and the victims. Then, ARAMCO undertakes the internal affairs, so that it announces the victim workers and the situation of the Company. Hence, I refer to the first announcement about the crisis to the Ministry of Interior, where the first official news appeared on social networks was posted by a Twitter account of the Saudi Ministry of Interior, which tweeted on its account as follows:

“Controlling two fires in two ARAMCO's refineries in Abqaiq and Khurais governorates as a result of being targeted by drones, and the competent authorities are conducting investigations”

The crisis was officially classified as an attack, without going into details in the first announcement, and people were reassured that the fire is under control. This was followed by an official statement released by the Ministry of Interior on the state television, with details about the accident and the number of victims, which were reported by the Ministry's spokesperson who noted that investigations into the accident are ongoing. Fourth: The position and situation of the Company was evaluated. ARAMCO released new official statement only hours after the accident on its website and on the official TV, which included the following points: situation is under control, identifying the type of the crisis "terrorist attack", the resulting effects of the crisis on both the human and material resources of the Company and its repercussions on the Company's business "halting production by 5.7 million barrels per day", thanking the work team, the expected alternative plans to face the crisis "it will continue to provide supplies by drawing from reserves", and directing the public to communication channels to get information.

### **Provision of information**

It is one of the most important strategies which have psychological dimensions, since once the crisis occurs, the stakeholders' urgent need for information appears, in addition to the psychological pressure that may result from uncertainty. This study found that ARAMCO has made available limited information for the public on the website and stated that it will provide details after 48 hours. The reason behind being a little late in publishing information is quoted as follows: "We were late in making this press conference one more day after the attack, because we want to give the public accurate and reliable information, and we want our company to be the source of the information". ARAMCO later informed the public that it would continue to provide supplies by withdrawal from the reserve stock, and that by the end of the current month of September 2019, production will return to the levels it had been before the attack. ARAMCO affirmed to its international refining company clients that there will be no shortage of supplies or delay in delivery, as they will receive the same quantities without shortage and at the specified and agreed times, without any impact on the supply of energy, electricity, water and fuel in the local market. It further added that no rise in energy prices would occur as a result of this attack.

### **Openness to the Media**

One of ARAMCO's most prominent communication strategies is opening its doors to international and local journalists on 20 September, i.e. Six days after the occurrence of the crisis, to visit and take photos of the disaster site and provide everyone with all the information. Then, it hosted Saudi newspaper editors-in-chief two weeks after the accident. This strategy is important for countering rumors and allegations about the Company's ability to continue production and meet its obligations and commitments. "To make available the progress our heroic employees are making in restoring global energy supplies, #Saudi ARAMCO opened the doors of Abqaiq and Khurais refineries for 80 representatives of Arab and international media outlets." and "To enhance continuous communication bridges, the Saudi ARAMCO hosted a delegation of Saudi newspaper editors-in-chief and opinion leaders and intellectuals at a field visit to the Company's headquarters to see the progress of business and the latest developments." Though this strategy is not one of the communication strategies identified by the SCCT, but the strategy of openness to the media can be considered as a secondary response which is deemed by Coombs as aiming at reinforcing and supporting the initial response strategies. This strategy is directed to the stakeholders, wherein the Company reminds the stakeholders of its good past and good work, and shows that the enterprise is a victim of the crisis. The rate of deployment of this strategy reached (6.2%) of the total number of communication strategies used.

### **Reputation management**

The Company's reputation during crises is affected by three elements: the Company's responsibility for the occurrence of the crisis, the history of the crisis, and the reputation of previous relationships,

which are considered major threatenersto the reputation of the organization if they are negative.The degree of company’s responsibility for the crisis largely affectsitsreputation.The greater the organization is responsible for the crisis, the greater the threat to its reputation.Therefore, ARAMCO asserted that it was not responsible for the crisis and that this attack was a sabotage and terrorist act aimed at destabilizingtheglobal energy security and weakening the state and its capabilities. Furthermore, this attack has a significant impact on energy and financial markets. In a statement published by ARAMCO, Prince Mohammed bin Salman was quotedsaying“‘The attack on ARAMCO targeted the core of the global energy industry.This attack does not affect the security of the Kingdom only, but ratherthe security of the region and the world as a whole. About 30% of the global energy supply comes from the Middle East. He described this act as a foolish act.”

ARAMCO benefited from its good record in dealing with crises, whether the previous crises are similar to or different from this crisis. A number of statements made by the official spokesman for ARAMCO, Eng. Amin Al-Nasser, shows that "The Company had previously faced this kind of crises a month before the date of the September 2010 crisis, i.e. the Shaybah field attacks, "although the previous attack on the Shaybah field caused light damage compared to the September crisis 2019 “However, at that time, these attacks were then dealt with in a professional and swift manner,” and that attack had no effects on the supplies, as the Company managed to recover production in record time. The researcher believes that the use of the crisis history may be a double-edged weapon.Although it may prove the Company's ability to deal with the crisis, but it may be a dangerousindicator to the organization's reputation for the frequent instances of the same type of the crisis.

The Company used the strategy of reminding of its good reputation before the crisis.The spokesperson mentioned that ARAMCO ranks high among oil companies in terms of reputation and reliability. “We are the most trusted company in the world. The percentages of trust in our company during the last 3 years were 99.7, 99.8, and 99.9%”.

**Table (3): SCCT’s Communication strategies used in the crisis management stage**

<b>Communication Strategies Used for Managing the Crisis</b>	
<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Frequency of Usage of the Strategy</b>
1. Crisis response strategies (Initial reply)	15%
Provision of Information	4%
Framing the crisis (Identifying the type of the crisis + Responsibility for the crisis)	1.3%
Reputation management (previous relations + crisis history)	10.2%
13. Audience’s emotions towards the organization	1.3%

### **Communication strategies for post-crisis stage**

They are the post-crisis strategy for follow-up with stakeholders and the public, and providing them with updates after the end of the crisis. The Twitter account showed ARAMCO's regular provision of news about recent developments - including information on the size of the reforms made, the recovered average production quantities, and the quantities of reserve stock—for its audiences and stakeholders.

Furthermore, providing the public of the organization with the results of investigations is evidence of the credibility and transparency of the Company, as well as its seriousness in knowing the causes and responsibility of the crisis and its initiation of an error corrective process.In cooperation with the Saudi Ministry of Defense, ARAMCOrevealed that the results of investigations confirmed that the attack on ARAMCO was carried out with more than 14 missiles by external parties (described as extremist and hostile). In a press conference held by the spokesman of the Ministry of Defense, it indicated that this

attack is a sabotage and terrorist act which threatens the global energy security and supplies. As shown in Table (4), ARAMCO explained in a number of posts that after the crisis, the Company became more powerful compared to the pre-crisis period, as ARAMCO always learns from these situations. It also explained that this crisis demonstrated a number of ARAMCO's points of strength, such as the efficiency of its employees, the efficiency of the infrastructure of its facilities, and the reliability of the Company despite the difficult conditions. The spokesperson, Eng. Amin Al-Nasser, added in a number of press interviews and international forums, for example "oil and money forum" and on ARAMCO's official Twitter account, that ARAMCO will learn and benefit from these events of this crisis in developing the aspects which would make it capable to face this kind of crises in a more professional and efficient ways. Al-Nasser also added that "we learn from these situations and they make us stronger and capable to overcome hardships and achieve the highest levels of reliability. These are characteristics that are deeply established in our work culture. We are stronger than ever before."

**Table (4): SCCT's Communication strategies used in the post-crisis stage**

<b>Post-Crisis Communication Strategies</b>	
<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Frequency of Usage of the Strategy</b>
2. The importance of following-up communications and providing the audiences and stakeholders with information and news on the recent developments of the crisis	2.2%
3. Reporting the investigation results	1.3%
4. Getting benefit and learning from this crisis	0.9%

### 3. Discussion and Conclusion

This study tested the SCCT on ARAMCO's digital platforms. It came up with a number of findings. The most prominent of these results was that ARAMCO dealt with the September 2019 crisis in a scientific methodological way. ARAMCO used 11 communication strategies consistent with the SCCT's strategies, in addition to three other strategies not mentioned in the SCCT, for example the community support strategy and the openness to media strategy. It is confirmed that ARAMCO underwent the three stages of the life of the crisis, as indicated by Coombs in the SCCT. These stages are: the pre-crisis stage, the crisis handling stage, and the post-crisis stage.

It turned out that, at the preparation stage for the crisis, ARAMCO sought to build thick relations by supporting the issues related to social responsibility and the issues related to environmental protection in its various locations where it operates around the world. ARAMCO's presence around the world through its partnerships and agreements, and also through its establishment of a number of affiliated facilities, is one of the main reasons for forming good relations between it and the public. These good relations help in crisis preparation and management, and made the audience in good terms with the Company. This was positively reflected in the feelings and behavioral intentions of the public towards the organization.

The organization of media appearances between ARAMCO and a number of government agencies, such as the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense, is one of the most positive attitudes which show ARAMCO's professionalism in dealing with the crisis and its nature. Coordination was made so that the Ministry of the Interior takes over the aspects related to the country's security and citizen security. ARAMCO focused on addressing the issues related to the extent of damage to petroleum facilities and their impact on the quantities of oil production and its supply. In addition, there was an organization in disseminating information, as the information and data published on all social media or on the Company's website is 100% identical information despite the different modes. This means that ARAMCO takes into account the nature of the platform in choosing the way of posting such

information. On Instagram accounts, reliance was placed on publishing photos, while on the Twitter account, the focus is on posting simplified information commensurate with the number of characters allowed. On the official website, the same topics are addressed but in a more extensive and detailed manner. In addition, ARAMCO was more open to media and disclosed all the details of crisis in full transparency and credibility by hosting international and local media delegations. The researcher notes that foreign media delegations were hosted at least 10 days before local media delegations. This gives a clear indication of ARAMCO's interest in informing the international public to make them closer to the crisis and its details. It is clear for the researcher how usage of social media is important for communications between the organization and its audience. It is found that ARAMCO's account on Twitter platform is the highest ARAMCO's account in followers and interaction. It is also found that ARAMCO sought to be present on the various social network platforms.

This study recommends the necessity of conducting more scientific and research studies focusing on analyzing communication strategies used in crisis management, and coming up with models that can be relied upon as ideal models for crisis management, as this study was limited to addressing the communication strategies used across digital platforms. For future studies, we suggest conducting studies addressing the ancient and modern means of communication. This study also recommends applying and expanding this type of studies to be made from within the Company, in order to gain a deep understanding and more accurate results of the communication strategies.

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