Facing the information void: A case study of Malaysia Airlines' media relations and crisis communication during the MH370 disaster

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Abstract

The disappearance of Malaysia Airlines' flight MH370 has been one of the most highly discussed and debated crises in recent times. The situation has put the organisation into the spotlight of global attention both as a business entity and as an extension of the Malaysian government. Drawing on mediating the media model (Pang, 2010) and information processing and knowledge management framework (Coombs, 2012), this study evaluates the air carrier's relationship with the media and online communication strategies during the crucial first two weeks of the crisis. The data were collected from Malaysia Airlines' traditional and new media public relations practices and were analysed using a qualitative case study methodology (Yin, 2009). This study argues that the unfavourable representation of Malaysia Airlines by its media stakeholders was complicated by both controlled and uncontrolled crisis elements ranging from information void to fragile relationship with the press.

Keywords: MH370, Malaysia Airlines, media relations, information void, crisis communication, airline accidents

Introduction

Airline accidents are unfortunate worldwide phenomena and have been recorded since the early days of aviation history (Ray, 1999). Whether causing a large or small number of casualties, these crises entail human tragedy and therefore attract a considerable amount of attention and scrutiny from the public, particularly the media. With the advancement of technology, news coverage of a crisis becomes not only a regional but also a global media event (Malone & Coombs, 2009). Although most airline companies have managed to reduce factors that may lead to accidents, crises are still inevitable due to the complex nature of airline technologies, human factors, as well as the interdependent nature of the sector (Ray, 1999).

For airlines, reputation is paramount, especially when they are questioned about safety, as the competition in this industry is fierce (Coombs, 2007). If lives are lost in an air disaster, the air carrier must prove that its future customers will be safe; otherwise, its financial viability and its mere existence may be jeopardised, potentially leading to its demise (Hodgson, Al Haddad, Al Zaabi, & Abdulrahim, 2015). One example of this is the Spanish airline Spanair that ceased to operate in 2012 after continuous financial problems following the crash of its flight 5022 in 2008, when Spanair was blamed for concealing unfavourable information during the crisis (Garcia-Santamaria, 2010). If an airline adopts an effective crisis communication strategy, however, it may repair or even prevent any damage to its reputation, especially if the public sees the organisation to be a victim itself. For example, Air France enacted a well-organised crisis communication plan after the disappearance of its flight AF447 in 2009, and later announced having crashed in the Atlantic ocean with 228 people on board (Hichri, 2009; Moreira, 2011). These previous incidents of crises indicate that efficient communication with local and international media can 'make or break' the reputation of an air company and ultimately its future operation.

The current research explores how Malaysia Airlines handled one of its important key stakeholders – the media – during the actual crisis stage after the disappearance of its flight MH370. Drawing on Coombs' (2012) information processing and knowledge management framework, and Pang's (2010) mediating the media model, this study examines the media relations and crisis communication strategies employed by the Malaysian authorities, in order to determine which strategies could be considered efficient and which actions could have caused reputational damage. This study is limited to the first two-week response stage of Malaysia Airlines, analysing the data from its online crisis communication and the selected published news reports on the crisis.

Crisis Overview

In the early hours of 8 March 2014, Malaysia Airlines' flight MH370 lost its contact with Kuala Lumpur Air Traffic Control Centre (KLATCC), while flying in between Malaysian and Vietnamese airspace just 40 minutes after it departed from Kuala Lumpur International Airport (Ministry of Transport, 2014; Australian Transport Safety Bureau, 2014). The plane was carrying 227 passengers, including two infants, and 12 crew members, and was expected to arrive in Beijing, China, at 6:30am the same day (Malaysia Airlines, 2014a). Two-thirds (153) of the passengers were Chinese citizens, with the rest of passengers originating from 13 other countries (Malaysia Airlines, 2014b). KLATCC initiated efforts to establish the location of MH370 by contacting air control centres of Singapore, Hong Kong and Vietnam but all units reported negative contact. Almost five hours after the plane took off, the Rescue Coordination Centre (RCC) was activated and MH370 flight was reported as "missing" (Ministry of Transport, 2014). As the authorities could not provide any specific information to the media, various speculations and theories arose as to the cause of its disappearance – from terrorism to mechanical failure (CBC News, 2014; Mendick, Verdaik, Nelson, & Moore, 2014). This situation put Malaysia Airlines in the middle of an

international crisis, both due to human tragedy, as well as media demands for answers, which made it extremely complex to handle.

The information void and inability to explain why the radar and communication systems on the plane were turned off led to public scrutiny from Malaysia Airlines' direct stakeholders; with relatives of the victims demanding the release of pertinent information about the missing flight, and journalists reporting the inaccurate and sometimes contradictory information released by the Malaysian authorities (Fuller & Perlez, 2014). Due to this, the airline was perceived as a secretive organisation and was challenged to operate with greater transparency. These allegations were persistently denied by Malaysia Airlines officials, who insisted that the company was cooperating fully and was not hiding any information from the public (Malaysia Airlines, 2014c; Malaysia Airlines, 2014d).

Apart from holding those communications in public domain, the Malaysian authorities also had to respond to queries of many other stakeholders, such as the International Air Transport Authority (IATA), the US Federal Aviation Authority (FAA), Federal Transport Safety Board, and a number of other international and regional airline safety and crash investigation bodies, insurance and legal companies, as well as a variety of aviation equipment manufacturers, including satellite tracking software and hardware producers. The political tension existing in the Asia-Pacific region led to the unwillingness of several countries to provide their military radar data on the possible path of MH370, also leading to the breakdown of communication between the Vietnamese and Malaysian government officials (Sinclair, 2014). Only seven days after its disappearance, the information about the plane's last signals ending in the Southern Indian Ocean was released to the public, and the search and rescue operation shifted from Southeast Asia to the west of Australia (Sinclair, 2014).

On 24 March 2014, more than two weeks after it was declared missing, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak officially confirmed that the missing flight had crashed in the Southern Indian Ocean without any potential survivors (Loh, 2014). This announcement partially ended a two-week information void. A total of 26 nations joined the hunt for the missing flight, with an estimated cost of $200 million – the most expensive search in the aviation history (Wardell, 2014; Skaddan, Alhashemi, Zaini, & Khuraishi, 2017). The search for the aircraft was sustained for next 1046 days and only ended on 17 January 2017, after the tripartite investigation bodies of Malaysia, Australia and China suspended the underwater search (Australian Transport Safety Bureau, 2017). As of this writing, the plane and the causes for its disappearance have yet to be found.

Literature review

Crisis communication and the publics

Accidents such as the disappearance of MH370 illustrate the vulnerability of the airline industry to organisational crises. During a crisis, an organisation can fall under severe media scrutiny that can jeopardise its public image (Fink, 1986). Frequently, a crisis induces a "sense of threat, urgency, and destruction, often on a monumental scale" (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003, p. 4). When crises are handled inappropriately, they can affect not only the organisation's reputation but also the credibility and viability of its operations (Howell, 2012).

There is a substantial body of literature that proposes how organisations should strategically communicate and respond to stakeholders during a crisis. The need for creating a proactive crisis communication plan has been raised by various authors who emphasised its importance in systematically responding to a crisis and in seizing control of a situation (Crandall, Parnell, & Spillan, 2014). Among the theoretical approaches and frameworks outlining crisis management, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory

(Coombs, 2007) suggests that crises can be divided into three typologies or clusters: the victim cluster, when an organisation may be considered to be a victim, as a result of such crises as natural disasters; the accidental cluster, the example of which may be seen in a technology failure, outside of an organisation's control; and the intentional or preventable cluster, where a crisis is considered to be caused by an organisation. While it is up to an organisation to provide information on the actual or possible causes for the crisis, it is often the stakeholders who decide on a type of crisis and who is to blame.

The crisis stage, called the response phase of crisis communication (Hale, Dulek & Hale, 2005), is the most critical moment of crisis management due to the "high levels of uncertainty, confusion, disorientation, surprise, shock and stress" (Seeger et al., 2003, p. 125), that are experienced by organisational leaders and managers. Different from managing relationships with stakeholders as a routine public relations function, crises present the need for crisis communicators to closely monitor and address more specific and demanding groups of stakeholders, both internal and external. Stakeholders, according to Clarkson (1995), "are persons or groups that have, or claim, ownership, rights, or interests in a corporation and its activities, past, present, or future" (p. 106). Grunig and Repper (1992) argue that stakeholders become publics when they "recognise one or more consequences of a problem and organise to do something about it or them" (p. 124). Thus, a group or an individual could be both a stakeholder and public depending on their level of involvement in an issue or crisis. If a crisis leads to the loss of lives, for example in airplane crashes, victims and their next of kin are considered the primary stakeholders, and the concern expressed about victims, together with sympathy towards their next of kin, is expected from an organisation as a mandatory communication strategy (Coombs, 2007).

Journalists as key publics

Journalists and news media are among the most important publics during a crisis. They are considered a special stakeholder group that searches and processes information for its audiences (Illia, Lurati, & Casalaz, 2013). This crucial role of journalists means organisations must engage with the media via open and honest communication and use them as a strategic resource in dealing with the crisis (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2015). As Garnett and Kouzmin (2007) note, efficient relationship with the media is imperative because crises are often media events as well.

Journalists follow a set of 'cultural codes' or news values that they use as a system of criteria for news selection and production (Hess & Weller, 2015). These news values reflect the information audiences seek from journalists and also the organisational, economic, social and cultural norms within the newsroom (Weaver, Beam, Brownlee, Voakes & Wilhoit, 2007). The work of public relations and journalism practitioners is often focused on the notion of information subsidies and reporting based on news values (Gandy, cited in Hess & Weller, 2015). Such traditional news values as impact, timeliness, prominence, proximity, the bizarre, conflict, currency and human interest (Galtung & Ruge, 1965) are still predominantly used in today's media landscape and are considered a staple component of media relations strategy (Hess & Weller, 2015). This means that journalists favour official sources for presenting news, although the popularity of social media as the source for public agenda is altering the traditional flow of information.

Crisis communicators should understand that "journalists are by nature, and by training suspicious" (Wailes, 2003, p. 15), and adequately managing the media is crucial in ending the crisis quickly and repairing tainted credibility. For instance, organisations are expected to hold press conferences even if they do not have enough information and knowledge of the situation. When answers to media questions are still unavailable, Coombs (2009) suggests that spokespeople should avoid saying "no comment" and instead promise to offer the information once they get it. A spokesperson addresses not only a roomful of reporters in a press conference, but also wider stakeholders such as

customers, employees, and other publics whose continued support is vital to the company's future (Crandall et al., 2014).

Handling the media during a crisis is a demanding task that requires releasing accurate information in a short span of time. The speed of information dissemination is of paramount importance as it gives an organisation an opportunity to control and set the media agenda. While an organisation is able to control the messages when publishing them on its website and other (controlled) platforms, most audiences would consume information from (uncontrolled) mass media (Coombs, 2007). It is also important to note that what audiences receive from the media is the 'stylised' version of facts in a narrative shape (Lippman, as cited in Lloyd & Toogod, 2015), wherein media are trying to interpret and make sense of the crisis and provide audiences with ideas of how to respond to it. Depending on how an organisation is represented in the media, audiences can choose to assign responsibility for the crisis to the organisation or to other parties.

Airlines and organisational crisis

Different from other types of crises that do not lead to loss of lives, a plane crash is much more difficult to handle. It has the potential to resonate throughout the sector, for example the makers of aviation equipment and aircraft's manufacturers (Ray, 1999). Applying Cornelissen's (2011) crisis type matrix, an airline disaster may fall into both internal and unintentional types of crises. However, if the accident is caused by a human-induced error, the crisis is harder to manage. The accident may be viewed as a criminal act and warrant criminal investigation. The extent of legal claims against the airline will depend on its ability to prove that it has done everything possible to prevent the accident, and that the fault lies fully with a third party (Brent, Fiol & Pratt LLP, 2014). This is further complicated when many parties come from several countries, each with different jurisdiction.

Most airline crashes are characterised by "the suddenness and fatal consequences of the triggering event" (Henderson, 2003, p. 285), which demand from an airline an immediate response and high level of communication with its stakeholders. Ray (1999) argues that the nature of a plane accident will test and challenge even the most prepared airline organisation because it destroys the travelling public's perception that the airline is safe. The airline is immediately blamed for the crisis, intensifying the perceptions and allegations of irresponsibility and inadequacy. Plane accidents are also a magnet of attention because of the general public's immediate desire to know the cause of the accident (Cobb & Primo, 2003).

Henderson (2003) explored Singapore Airlines' crisis communication during the SQ006 crisis. Its Flight SQ006 bound for Los Angeles crashed into construction equipment prior to take off from Taipei's Chiang Kai-Shek Airport on 31 October 2000. Out of 179 people on board, there were 83 fatalities (Aviation Safety Network, n.d.). Singapore Airlines was unable to conduct the full investigation of the accident because it had occurred on the territory of another country. The Taiwanese authorities straight away blamed the pilots for taking the wrong runway causing the aircraft to hit the debris on it. There were other factors that led to some controversy regarding possible causes of the crash, such as the inability of the control tower, due to night time and bad weather, to see or guide the plane onto the correct runway; the inadequate signage and lights on the runway that the pilots believed were fully operational, as well as the weather – Taipei was preparing to be hit by Typhoon Xangsane (Tan, 2006).

While the Singaporean authorities did not agree with the findings from the investigation conducted by Taiwan's Civil Aviation Authority, Singapore Airlines' CEO did something that ultimately saved the reputation of the organisation – he accepted full responsibility for the crash on behalf of the airline and immediately initiated a highly praised "buddy" system to support the victims and their kin (Tan, 2006). His statement was reported by media worldwide and became an exemplary of a perfect "textbook" approach to a crisis:

"They are our pilots. It was our aircraft. It should not have been on that runway. We fully accept our responsibility to our passengers, our crew and their families" (Shameen, 2000). Despite the two contradictory reports issued by the Taiwanese authorities and their Singaporean counterparts, Singapore Airlines needed to continue its business relations with Taiwan to be able to keep using its airports. It engaged in strategic media relations following the release of both reports in April 2002. The CEO once again was lauded for stating that he did not want to point blame to anyone but only to "recognise their [other factors'] contribution to the accident" (Tan, 2006, p. 55). Other communication strategies effectively employed by Singaporean crisis communicators were hedging responsibility, making amends, and offering reassurance.

Apart from SQ006, other highly covered airline disasters include the crash of Spanair flight 5022 in 2008 and the disappearance of Air France flight AF447 in 2009. The pilots of the Barcelona-bound Spanair flight lost control of the airplane, killing 154 out 172 people on board (CIAIAC, 2011). The plane hit the ground shortly after take-off, followed by the fire that broke out immediately after the impact (CIAIAC, 2011). Most of the victims were Spanish nationals, although 19 of them were foreigners. The media coverage of Spanair crisis was described as "one of the most revealing news events in Spanish media panorama" (Garcia-Santamaria, 2010, p. 516). The disappearance of Air France's flight AF447 also became a global news event. The plane took off from Rio de Janeiro airport and was scheduled to arrive in Paris after its usual 12-hour flight. However, three and a half hours after take-off, the pilots also lost control of the aircraft and plunged into the Atlantic ocean killing all 228 people on board (Bureau d'Enquêtes et d'Analyses, 2012; Oliver, Calvard & Potočnik, 2017). The wreckage of AF447 was found nearly two years after the disaster (Stone, Keller, Kratzke, & Strumpfer, 2014).

Both airlines were engaged in similar communication strategies straight after the accidents, including giving frequent press conferences and publishing a number of news releases. Apart from being quiet in the first eight hours of the crisis, Spanair regularly talked to the press covering the event. However, they were blamed for trying to conceal unfavourable information and for offering short statements that contributed to more uncertainties surrounding the crisis (Garcia-Santamaria, 2010, p. 516). In a study of the journalism practice during the Spanair crisis, Garcia-Santamaria (2010) identified the difficulty of getting primary and secondary sources and journalism vagueness as some of the factors that affected the airlines' relationship with the media. The accident was firmly placed by the stakeholders into the intentional cluster, where the airline was considered fully responsible for the crash and loss of lives, which ultimately led to its demise.

Air France, however, was found to excel in terms of speed of their action plan and management of first priorities, including looking after the next of kin and releasing information (Hichri, 2009). As the black boxes from Air France flight AF447 were found only two years later, the disappearance of the plane had remained a mystery. Moreira (2011) found that at the early stages of the crisis and until the black boxes were found, Air France adopted the 'acceptance strategy', by showing their empathy towards victims' families, responding to media with the high level of transparency and expressing their concerns to other stakeholders. This strategy protected the reputation of the company as evidenced by the favourable reporting by the media. The disappearance of flight AF447 was most likely placed by the stakeholders into the accidental cluster, hence shifting the blame from the airline. After the wreckage of the plane was found and until the full report from the investigation was published, Air France used the 'silence strategy' (Moreira, 2011), in order to avoid any damage to its reputation. The report concluded that both the human error and the technical issues resulted in the crash, which threatened the position of the airline. Moreira argues that to protect its reputation at this stage, Air France then shifted to the 'scapegoat strategy', blaming other parties in the disaster. Due to the airline's initial communication strategies that resulted in maximum transparency with the media, as well as its acceptance of responsibility towards the victims and families, Air France has come out of this crisis relatively unscathed. When the explanation for the accident changed

two years later, the most critical moment for Air France was over, as the media had already lost interest in this 'old' news, consequently allowing Air France to escape public scrutiny.

There are considerable similarities between the crash of Air France flight AF447 into the Atlantic Ocean and the disappearance of flight MH370 – both of them were, in fact, labelled as the 'mystery' flights. Therefore, the analysis of the crisis communication strategies and media relations employed by the Malaysian authorities immediately after the disappearance of its flight and the comparison to the ones enacted by Air France can help answer the question how the Malaysia Airlines was perceived by its stakeholders, especially through the eyes of the media, in the first two weeks after the accident.

Theoretical background

It is clear that the complex nature of MH370 as a crisis and media event was extremely hard to manage due to its disappearance and lack of any physical evidence of the crash. Coombs (2012) argues that "a crisis creates an information void" (p. 141) – a specific circumstance when the knowledge of the situation is scarce and the pressure to deliver information to stakeholders is the highest. As Ulmer et al. (2015) note, "the greatest uncertainty involved is determining who is at fault" (p. 95), and that knowing the cause of the crisis is necessary to attribute responsibility. They use the term 'communication ambiguity' to describe a situation, when, due to the lack of information, organisations are unable to deliver precise answers to important questions – a circumstance present in the MH370 crisis.

It is important to note that the crucial stage of filling the information void is prone to misinformation, which, according to Marra (2003), could also become the focus of news. It manifests in various ways during the crisis stage. First, when there is difficulty of gathering information; second, when an organisation lacks reliable, solid and accurate information; third, when an organisation is faced with rumours and speculations; and fourth, when an organisation thinks that the crisis will fade away if it does not respond to this vacuum (Pang, 2013).

Addressing the information void requires adequate media relations. Pang's (2010) mediating the media model suggests that crisis managers must be aware of five important factors about journalism as both a practice and a profession: journalists' mindset (individual background), journalists' routines (deadlines and information needs), newsroom routines (structures and organisational power relations), extramedia forces (legal parameters), and media ideology (ideological positions and views). By preparing for a crisis and closely examining the external and internal practices in journalism, crisis communicators are able to work better with the journalists who cover the crisis. This approach is also beneficial in "winning the journalists over by the knowledge of their work and their profession" (Pang, 2010, p. 193).

Figure 1. Framework based on Coombs' (2007) information processing and knowledge management
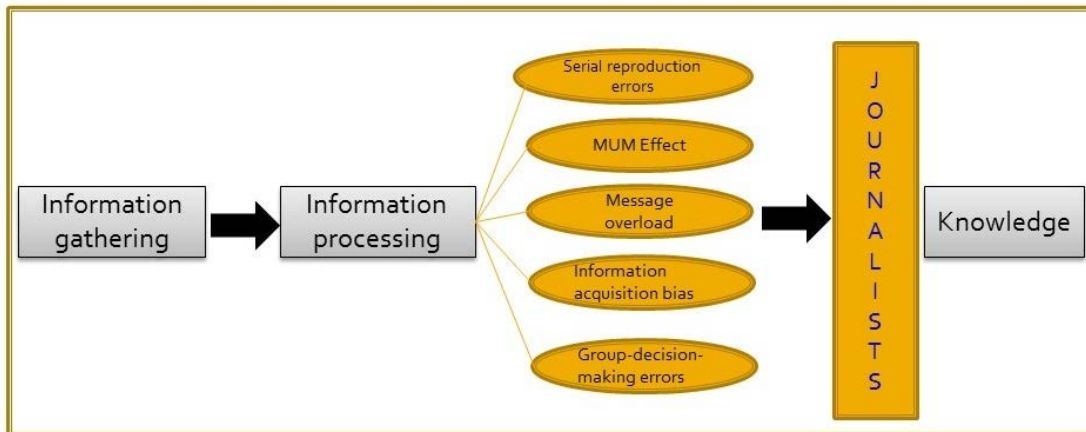
Furthermore, a crisis team facing uncertainty during emergency needs to recognise that information processing and knowledge management are plagued with five organisational flaws (Coombs, 2007). These flaws include: serial reproduction errors or distortion of information as it travels towards the final destination; the MUM effect, or "keeping Mum about Undesirable Messages" (Rosen & Abraham, 1970, cited in Coombs, 2007, p. 254); the risk of message overload; bias in information acquisition; and errors committed during group-decision making. Overcoming these flaws may result in "situation awareness" (Coombs, 2007, p. 113) – the goal of any crisis management plan and also the counterpart of information void. In the diagram based on Coombs' framework (see Figure 1), journalists are situated between crisis communication flaws and the generation of knowledge as a way to emphasise the media's significant position and role in a crisis event.

Methodology

This research uses a case study approach to identify key public relations practices used by Malaysia Airlines during the MH370 crisis, including those that influenced the way the organisation was portrayed by its media stakeholders. Case study as a research strategy has been applied in various social sciences, emphasizing the researcher's particular choice of an object or subject to be studied (Stake, 1995). In public relations, the study of cases often mirrors a "condensed wisdom of the profession" (Pauly & Hutchison, 2001, p. 381), due to its contribution to the understanding of practice, as well as theory development (Cain, 2009).

Yin (2009, p.15) summarises the case study as methodology pointing to its four primary applications: to describe an intervention and its context; to illustrate a theme or topic; to explore further a phenomenon; and to explain cause and effect links in real scenarios. The latter, in particular, was applied in this research, treating MH370 crisis as a unit of analysis. In addition, while this case study looks at MH370 predominantly as a public relations issue, the presence of journalism actors as a specialist stakeholders group during the crisis means approaching MH370 event as a journalistic case study as well.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of Malaysia Airlines' experience handling their media stakeholders during the MH370 crisis, we collected two layers of publicly available data. First, we conducted an online search for news reports published within the first two weeks of the MH370 crisis, from 8-24 March 2014. The keyword filters for this search included the terms related to the crisis, such as "MH370", "crisis" and "Malaysia Airlines". Second, we examined Malaysia Airlines' online and traditional crisis communication practices by monitoring activities on its website and other online presence,

as well as analysing the press conferences and media releases published online, within the first two weeks of the crisis. The analysis focuses on the impact of communicative decisions and actions executed by the crisis team at the height of the disaster.

Analysis and Discussion

Prior to the crisis, Malaysia Airlines, the national carrier of Malaysia and Southeast Asia's fourth-largest airline by market value (Daga & Ngui, 2014), had enjoyed a good airline safety standing. Out of 449 airlines operating globally, Malaysia Airlines was ranked 34th in 2013 (AirlineRatings, 2015). It held a decent record of service and best practices excellence and had gained over 100 awards in the previous 10 years (Malaysia Airline, 2014e). More than 50% of Malaysia Airlines shares were owned by the government through Penerbangan Malaysian Berhad, a wholly owned subsidiary of the Malaysian government (Doganis, 2006; Penerbangan, n.d.). This strengthened its status as a national carrier and placed more responsibility in representing the nation; at the same time, its economic stability was backed up by the government (Bakar, Gani bin Hamzah, & Muhammad, 2014).

Malaysia Airlines was perceived to be one of the safest passenger airlines operating in the region and had no accidents in the previous two decades. Its last major plane accident involved its domestic flight MH2133 that had crashed in 1995 due to a pilot error killing 34 people (Aviation Safety Network, n.d.). The MH370 tragedy was the first and the biggest organisational crisis that the company faced in recent times; the second one being the crash of the flight MH17 shot over the war zone in the Eastern Ukraine on 17 July 2014, with all 298 people on board killed (Bakar et al., 2014). News company CNN called 2014 a "bad year for Asia", referring to both accidents of Malaysia Airlines and also a crash of AirAsia Flight 8501 in December 2014 that took 162 lives (Yan & Cripps, 2014). The rating of Malaysia Airlines subsequently dropped from the 34th in 2014 to the 57th in 2015 (AirlineRatings, 2015).

The airline's status as a national or flag carrier also made MH370 a complex crisis to handle. Previous crashes of national carriers' aircraft show that such disasters would affect the whole nation. For example, the deadliest air disaster in New Zealand history was the crash of Air New Zealand flight 901 on 28 November 1979, into remote Mt. Erebus in Antarctica, killing 257 people. As Air New Zealand was owned by the government, the latter also had to face public scrutiny, which led to the establishment of a Royal Commission of Enquiry (Auburn, 1983). Its chairman, Justice Peter Mahon, placed full responsibility for the accident on Air New Zealand and accused the airline officials of concocting "an orchestrated litany of lies" (The Mahon report, 2009). However, due to it being government-owned, Air New Zealand escaped severe legal and financial consequences and continued to operate without any major changes or restructuring.

Figure 2. The airlines' publics *(adapted from Henderson, 2003)*
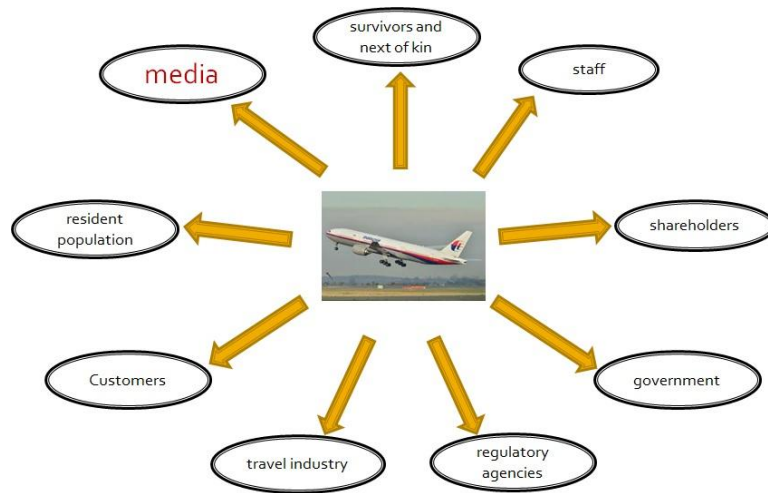
As the Malaysian government owns a significant portion of Malaysia Airlines, it falls into a hybrid type of an organisation: a privately owned and profit-generating corporation and at the same time a public organisation. This status puts Malaysia Airlines in the spotlight of public attention both as a business entity and as an extension of the government. Consequently, the reputation of Malaysia Airlines is extended to the Malaysian Government and to the whole nation. According to Hodgson et al. (2015), this may affect the entire Asian region, with possible negative consequences for trade and tourism. This requires addressing a wide group of publics such as victims' next of kin from different countries, international news media, various legislative and safety regulation bodies, shareholders and numerous other publics in the industry (see Figure 2; adapted from Henderson, 2003).

MH370 and the new media ecosystem

As Howell (2015, p. 18) points in her analysis of MH370 crisis, controlling the message in today's 'new media ecosystem' is the most challenging aspect of digital crisis communication. She highlights the challenges crisis communicators face during an information void and uses the term 'Black Swan' to refer to the unpredictability, enormity of impact, and the 'shock value' of MH370 as a disaster. We argue that the mere absence of accurate information following the disappearance of Flight MH370 paved the way for misinformation and online rumours to circulate rapidly on social media. These actions generated a new set of online publics that are capable of causing reputational damage by taking advantage of social platforms.

Figure 3. Screenshot of fake information posted on Twitter during the MH370 crisis

Emergency situations such as MH370 are a particular magnet for fake news due to the lack of official data and delay in verifying information. An evidence of this was the rapid circulation of at least 92 different rumours in the Chinese microblogging site Weibo, during the first two days of MH370 crisis (Jin, Cao, Jiang, & Zhang, 2014). On Facebook and Twitter, untrue information that the MH370 aircraft made a safe emergency landing in China was also quickly shared online and brought false hope to the victims' next of kin (Goh et al., 2017). Some of these rumours also appeared on a number of hoax social media accounts claiming that the missing flight had already been found (see Figure 3). CNN, for instance, had a number of fake profiles that were active during the crisis, such as @ReaICNN, @OfficiaIlCNN, @OfficiaICNN, @Official_CNN and @OFFICIALCNN_ (Young, 2014). The tweets of these fake accounts were often loaded with online scams such as clickjacking, fraud and data phishing (Sharma, 2014; Young, 2014).

In addition, the number of social media accounts claiming relation to Malaysia Airlines and its crisis rose significantly from 50 to more than 680 across different social media platforms (Sharma, 2014). Three types of accounts prevailed: accounts that circulated malware and viruses, accounts that were used to air grievances against the airlines, and accounts that solicited funding for the victims (Sharma, 2014). These online practices can overwhelm any organisations experiencing a crisis, especially in moments of information void.

The propagation of these virtual forms of misinformation during a crisis validates the vulnerability of the online and social media systems to abuse and misuse and is a critical information layer that communicators need to manage. A practical solution would be to use the same online platform in circulating counter-rumour responses. Goh et al. (2017) argue that if there is a "concerted effort in releasing these messages on social media, other interested users will eventually retransmit them to their social networks" (p 11).

Online strategies during the emergency phase

Our analysis shows that in terms of exploiting online platforms to communicate during the crisis, Malaysia Airlines followed the guidelines set by International Air Transport Association (2016). The organisation was relatively quick in responding in the first few hours of the crisis. They immediately activated their 'dark website' (see Figure 4) – a pre-designed and otherwise hidden online page where press releases were posted and updated regularly (Alfonso & Suzanne, 2008). It is recommended to have this alternative website pre-prepared in case of a crisis, so that it may be quickly modified according to specific circumstances and either replace the existing regular website, or have a very visible link to it from the usual one. It is termed "dark" because it is associated with a serious crisis, often involving fatalities or significant damage to key publics; hence, it is normally designed in dark and sombre colours. This practice is an indication that Malaysia Airlines is integrating the internet in their crisis communication (Coombs, 2009).

Figure 4. Screenshot of Malaysia Airlines' website providing link to the dark site
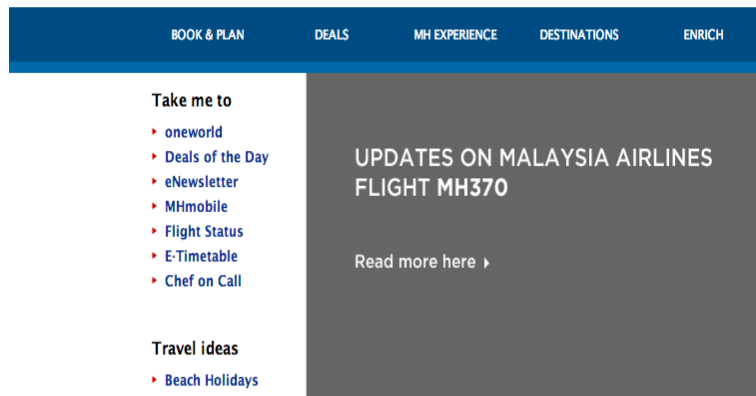

Figure 5. Screenshot of media statements published both in Chinese and English

Figure 6. Screenshot of Malaysia Airlines' toned-down grey Facebook account

Figure 7. Screenshot of media statements published both in Chinese and English

On Malaysia Airlines' dark website, media statements were published both in English and Chinese to accommodate the diverse backgrounds of their key publics, as the majority of the passengers on board were from China (see Figure 5). They also quickly toned down the promotional content of their website and social media accounts including Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and their page on the Chinese microblogging site Weibo (see Figures 6 and 7) – a critical strategy used by airlines in crisis (Armon, 2010). Their social media pages also contained continuous updates about the situation. These practices reflect how social media can be utilised as a particular asset in communicating with the publics, removing the traditional barrier of news media and allowing the redemption of corporate reputation through a direct contact with the audience. Coombs (2018, p. 34) used the term "hub-and-spoke" to describe the role of the organisational website as a controlled hub of information and the social media as the spokes that contain links directing the audience back to the main hub. This is particularly useful in times of crisis, when providing a link to news releases via social media is more strategic and widespread. Due to social media's immense impact during the crisis, the situational crisis communication

theory (Coombs, 2007) recommends to include the value of strategic selection of social media types that best address the situation. A clear indicator of Malaysia Airlines' adaptation of this strategy was its use of Weibo to join the conversation during the peak of the crisis, although it was described as "passive" (Zhang, Wang, Wu, Wang & Buck, 2018, p. 220). On the other hand, Malaysia Airlines' Twitter communication during the crisis was expressing empathy and concern for families and relatives of passengers (Howell, 2015), as an example of the emerging social-mediated crisis communication strategy (Cheng & Cameron, 2018; Jin, Liu & Austin, 2014).

Relationship with the media

After the first announcement confirming the disappearance of the flight MH370, the Malaysian authorities conducted daily press conferences, followed by media releases posted on the Malaysia Airlines website, initially twice a day. Press briefings were also conducted by high ranking officials of the government. These strategies benefitted the journalists that covered the event, and showed the professional management of the briefings (Howell, 2015). In addition, Malaysia Airlines deployed dedicated caregivers and Chinese translators to offer psychological support and comfort to families of the passengers (Malaysia Airlines, 2014f). The caregivers provided assistance and any available information to families, organised travel and accommodation for those who decided to fly to Malaysia, as well as looked for signs of extreme distress to refer such people for counselling. These specific actions were lauded in the public relations circles (Agnes, 2014) and also widely reported by the media.

Although the Malaysian authorities communicated promptly during the crisis, there were some aspects of their crisis communication management and media relations that were largely scrutinised. Most notably, various news reports raised the issue of imprecise and incomplete information being released by different spokespeople causing confusion and misinformation (e.g. Denyer, 2014; Fuller & Perlez, 2014; Hodal, 2014; Mader, 2014; Missing Malaysia, 2014). For instance, Group CEO Ahmad Jauhari Yahya was quoted by the media saying that the plane had been still in contact with air traffic controllers about two hours into the flight (Jamieson, 2014). However, the Acting Minister of Transport Datuk Hishamuddin Tun Hussein was quoted saying that the last signal had been received less than one hour after it had taken off (Denyer, 2014). Hishamuddin was also quoted that four passengers of MH370 had travelled on stolen passports which officials later on changed to two. Furthermore, the Home Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi described the two passengers on fake passports as "Asian looking" but that was later denied by other officials (Sipalan, 2014).

The pilots were also investigated by the Malaysian authorities; however, confusing statements were issued to the media. For example, Malaysian Police Chief Khalid Abu Bakar said they had visited the pilots' homes on March 16 but later on issued another statement contradicting his previous account. He said that the police had first visited the pilots' homes as early as March 9, the day after the flight disappeared (Mader, 2014). Even the Prime Minister Najib Razak was quoted that the last voice contact received from the cockpit had taken place after the shutdown but later on was corrected by the Acting Transport Minister (Calder & Withnall, 2014). Throughout the crisis stage, when the publics were hungry for information, Malaysia Airlines and government officials were criticised for the contradictory information issued by various civilian and military leaders and their lack of crisis management experience.

The demand to fill the information void in MH370 crisis was driven not only by their key publics, for instance the families of victims, but also by the media's requirement to produce news contents (Pang, 2013). This makes crisis management and crisis communication intricately connected turning every crisis into a crisis of information (Lagadec, 1993). When the communication with the flight stopped, Malaysia Airlines could not provide any specific information about it because the automatic tracking system of the

plane had been shut down, as it was announced several days later. Why this happened was another question the Malaysian authorities were unable to answer, adding to the information void.

MH370 was an international flight; it carried the passengers from 14 nations; also, multiple bodies from different countries were involved in the accident. Consequently, it was expected that the key publics were global and crossed geographical borders. Dealing with such a diverse group of stakeholders requires an advanced training in international media relations, for which Malaysia Airlines appeared to have been unprepared. Bradley (2014) argues that the way officials of Malaysia Airlines handled the foreign journalists was an indication of their inexperience in dealing with the demanding international news media, in comparison to the more government-friendly local media.

Malaysian media are not able to exercise the same freedoms as some of their international counterparts, which covered the disappearance of MH370, such as CNN, Reuters and nearly 300 others. Reporters without Borders (2015) rank Malaysia 147th out of 180 countries in its World Press Freedom Index. While this ranking comes from the Western perspective and may be criticised for its ethnocentric bias, the analysis of two Malaysian Sunday newspapers covering MH370 crisis suggests that both of them refrained from openly criticising the officials for the inadequate handling of the crisis (Halim, 2014). The English language newspaper, popular among the Chinese community in Malaysia, highlighted more openly the sufferings and plight of the relatives of passengers from China; however, it still did not voice any open criticisms, only implying that the Chinese publics could have been provided with better care and more empathy (Halim, 2014).

Used to loyal and self-censoring local media, the Malaysian authorities were unprepared to the demands and the level of detail required by international media sources. Feeling extreme pressure to provide any information that would explain the mystery of the disappearance of MH370, various officials chosen as spokespeople rushed to give some details that had not been verified properly and later often changed or disproved. While trying to provide some information to help the media in reporting on the accident, many of them were criticised by international media for their mistakes and unprofessionalism, damaging the reputation of both Malaysia Airlines and all other government and civil bodies involved in the investigation of the accident. Nonetheless, it is important to consider that the airlines' negative relationship with the press is also rooted in the clash that frequently appears at the very point of information distribution in emergency situations, and partly due to the differences in primary agenda between public relations and journalism (Xifra & Sheehan, 2015). In addition, Pont (as cited in Xifra & Sheehan, 2015) highlights that the stiff media competition, the difficulty and rigour of securing information, the differentiation between media and the violation of journalism ethical standards are the factors that also contribute to the clash between crisis communication actors and media workers.

Some of these assumptions reverberate in our analysis of five press conferences organized by the Malaysian authorities after the disappearance of MH370. Journalists did not have many possibilities to ask questions, as the access to the floor was decided by the spokespeople of the higher rank who had the power to select the next speaker, interrupt a current speaker or agree to answer more questions (Nasharudin, Alias & Maros, 2014). Also, journalists were unable to ask any follow-up questions to verify the information or get more details, due to a very limited time allocated for questions and answers, which could have caused irritation and suspicion among journalists. Not providing journalists with enough information to report may cause them to shift the news frame from investigation to victims and re-focus the news angle on existing rumours and speculations. This was prevalent in the case of MH370 crisis, where conspiracy theories rife on the internet made way into mainstream media due to the information void and lack of enough detail from reliable sources (Dudd, 2015).

Furthermore, having various spokespeople providing different or contradictory information can also lead to confusion and jeopardise the credibility of a source. Media reports, which were released within the two-week crisis response period, indicate that at least nine sources ranging from civil to military officers had been cited by journalists. Among the most quoted were: Malaysia Airlines' Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Acting Minister of Transport, Home Minister, Director-General of Civil Aviation, Chief of Air Force, Malaysian Police Chief, Director of Commercial, CEO of a subsidiary company Firefly, and the Prime Minister. This practice of multiple spokespeople or "bank of experts" (Hess & Waller, 2015, p. 103) allowed a plurality of voices and professional opinion about the missing flight. But it was subjected to scrutiny, given the contradictory information that so many spokespeople fed to the media. Scholars further emphasise the value of consistency in crisis response, stating that airline organisations are viewed more legitimate and credible if they deliver consistent messages to their stakeholders (Coombs, 2009). This does not necessarily mean having only one spokesperson. Consistent communication could be achieved by maintaining coordinated efforts and responses to media inquiries (Coombs, 2009). Rank should not be the sole consideration when appointing a spokesperson (Crandall et al., 2014). As Goldberg (2018) has argued, a financial officer can be interpreted as profit-motivated, a PR spokesperson can be accused of 'spin', while the CEO, although more credible, does not guarantee success once the camera starts rolling. For most important messages, for example for the announcement that the flight must have crashed in the Southern Indian Ocean with no survivors, the information was delivered by the highest official on the national level – the Prime Minister. For relaying information that was more ambiguous or for answering difficult questions, other officials were chosen depending on their rank, as their answers could jeopardise their credibility and affect their position. However, a spokesperson needs to articulate and be able to speak with a "convincing level of empathy" (Wailes, 2003, p. 14). If a senior manager lacks media training, this can make the crisis even worse. Hyslop (2008) suggests that appropriate training is essential in responding to questions during press conferences. The organisational reputation is at risk when crisis communicators lack the experience and training in dealing with "story-hungry reporters" (Maddocks, 2013, p. 3). All these aspects of information management and media relations play a critical role in successful crisis communication, especially in times of ambiguity and confusion.

Conclusion

The disappearance of flight MH370 still remains one of the aviation's greatest mysteries. Although evidences of an airplane wreckage were found on the French island of Réunion in the Indian Ocean and were potentially from the missing flight, the cause of the disaster is yet to be known (Weaver, Topham & Phillips, 2015). The Malaysian authorities are yet to come up with a viable explanation of what actually happened to the plane and its passengers. This case looks very similar to Air France flight AF447, which remained a mystery for more than two years, until its black boxes were found and the investigation determined the causes of the crash. While both crisis situations involved an identical case of flight disappearance over the ocean after the loss of contact, the way each organisation responded to the crisis led to different consequences.

Information void was present in both cases, and international media were waiting for answers. While being unable to explain the mystery of the disappearance of its flight, Air France managed to gain sympathy from the media because it had provided them with consistent and regular updates and also because it accepted the responsibility for the crisis even without knowing its cause, which produced a favourable impression on its stakeholders. Based on those strategies, it can be argued that the media and other key publics assigned the crisis into the accidental cluster that shifted the blame away from the airline.

Although compassion was prevalent in the early phase of the MH370 crisis, the reputation of the airline was immediately questioned afterwards (Zhang, Vos, & Veijalainen, 2018). It was also evident that while Malaysia Airlines and the Malaysian Government worked hand in hand to address the crisis, the "human side of the story" was overwhelming for the crisis management team to handle (Howell, 2015, p. 17). Malaysia Airlines was unable to provide consistent crisis communication, due to the lack of knowledge on the incident and the confusing and contradictory reports voiced by numerous spokespeople. The authorities failed to respond adequately to international journalists; hence, the attitude of foreign media was highly critical and their coverage of the way the crisis was handled appeared to be negative. The reporting made by international journalists indicated that the airline had a weak relationship with the press. It is possible to suggest that the key publics are likely to place this crisis into the intentional cluster, assigning full blame for it onto the airline and potentially extending it to the government.

Similar to highly praised "buddy" system initiated for helping the victims and their families by Singapore Airlines, Malaysia Airlines deployed the caregivers to the passengers' next of kin, including Chinese translators for those coming from China. Nonetheless, on its own, this action could not overcome the negative evaluation by foreign journalists, including and, especially, the Chinese media. In this regard, it is reasonable to conclude that what worked for the reputation of Singapore Airlines the best was its full acceptance of responsibility for the crash, even though the airline disputed the findings of the Taiwanese investigators on very valid grounds. It seems paradoxical that Singapore Airlines won its reputation back by admitting responsibility when there was enough information to doubt that and when it produced a different report on findings, indicating other factors rather than purely pilots' error to contribute to the crash. However, in comparing the crisis communication strategies of Air France and Singapore Airlines, both organisations clearly indicated to the media that they were ready to accept full responsibility and were interested in full transparency in their communication to key publics; hence, the media coverage of the airlines was rather positive. This, unfortunately, did not occur in MH370 crisis. There was no clear statement from Malaysia Airlines that it had accepted full responsibility for the accident; neither was there an indication of transparency in its communication. The very mystery of the plane's disappearance seemed to provide an excuse for avoiding those.

In summary, the analysis of the Malaysian authorities' communication strategies during the first two weeks after the disappearance of flight MH370 illustrates that the information void and the lack of solid understanding of MH370 crisis affected Malaysia Airlines' crisis communication and media relations strategies, which eventually led to unfavourable reporting by the media. The complex nature of MH370 crisis and the major reputational threat caused by the accident also challenged the preparedness of Malaysia Airlines to deal with the scrutiny of international media. While new media channels were effectively utilised by its crisis communicators to reach a diverse group of publics, the analysis of the media's reporting of the crisis shows that Malaysia Airlines struggled to create a credible image to the international community due to misinformation and contradictory messages delivered though the media. We conclude that the reputational challenge of Malaysia Airlines is a reflection of the changing business environment where organisations operate and co-exist, for example the prevalence of web and participatory channels such as social media that can rapidly become a platform for public scrutiny (Bonini, Court & Marchi, 2009). Journalists too are adjusting to this new media landscape. As MH370 crisis occurred in both offline and online environments, our findings suggest that apart from applying and mastering traditional public relations techniques, crisis managers also need to constantly elevate their knowledge of the digital and build relationship with new media publics, including journalists, in order to be able to step in and address complex crisis situations online, and consequently rebuild the organisation's reputation.

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