

Crisis Communication Strategies During the Code Red Phase of Aviation Industry and Media Framing Discrepancies: Case of Malaysia Airlines Twin Tragedy

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Abstract

The aviation industry was deemed to be most vulnerable when it comes to crises in the transportation industry.) This vulnerability is mainly due to the risks of corporate bankruptcy and deaths in the worst-case scenario as airlines are majorly exposed to every type of crises such as financial, terrorism, financial, management failures, and natural factors [1]. Thus, in order to address such crises, it is important for MAS to have a proper and effective crisis communication approach. This study will be looking into 1) the crisis communication strategies and procedures adapted by Malaysia Airlines and 2) The discrepancies of media framing to the actual event situation. This qualitative study utilizes the case study approach where the perspective and insights are gained through an in-depth interview with an expert who was personally involved and in charge of the crisis communication during when the Emergency Operation Committee (EOC) took over the crisis management of MH370 and MH17. A thematic analysis and constant comparison with open-source data strategy will be carried out upon the data gathered and themes are extracted in fulfilling the aim of the study. The findings for RO1 shows the procedure during crisis response and the crisis response strategies during the pre-crisis, crisis / code red, and post crisis phase. For RO2 the finding shows discrepancies in the alleged delayed response from Malaysia Airlines as well as in the existence of assumptions that lead to conspiracy theories and fake news.

Keywords: *Crisis Communication, Aviation Industry, Malaysia Airlines, Twin Tragedies, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Media Framing*

1.0 Introduction

In many industrial sectors, business corporations or service activities, unprecedented events or situations often happen out of the blue and some of these events can even be unpleasant and detrimental towards the organizational business operation. The extent whereby these events struck an organization is generally understood as “crisis”. This term of “crisis” has been proven to coincide with what defined by [2] as “a specific, unexpected and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or perceived to threaten an organization’s high priority goals”. When a crisis happens to strike organizations, it is vital for organizations to analyze the type of crises that they are experiencing, implementing strategic planning, deploying available essential teams and preferably, a conclusive and fair solution. According to [3], these processes of strategizing, planning, mobilizing teams and working towards the solution are defined as “crisis management” and “crisis communication” efforts although it is noted that “crisis management” is more to seek crisis prevention, but it is also vital to establish it along with its counterpart which is the communication elements itself thus, bringing the term “crisis communication” as a universal description towards organizational efforts of minimizing the threat of incoming crises or already existing ones. [3], [4]

Generally, crises are often deemed as devastating from the spectacles of most organizations and stakeholders, but at the same time, it can also be resolved positively and could even impose latent potential as a driving factor for organizational growths or improvements in the future prospect if the organization knows on how to conduct proper crisis management and crisis communication efforts. [5] Due to the nature of crises which are very much situational, relative and varied, it is almost impossible for organizations or business organizations to adhere to a sole and specific set of standardized crisis management procedures [6]. One of the instances of crises as varied and situational can be seen from the crisis communication efforts and crisis management procedures practiced within the aviation industry itself, particularly referring to the Malaysia Airlines (MAS) twin tragedies namely MH370 and MH17 back in 2014. In this particular plane crash or missing plane disaster, the magnitude of what was at stake when the crisis occurred are very much bigger than just mere reputation as it involves sufferings, loss of lives and hardships resulting in the distinguished and specialized crisis communication efforts compared to other industries. [7], [8]. The year 2014 had seen the gloomiest and calamitous events over the loss of both MH370 and followed up not long after by MH17. Thus, this study aims to address some of the insights from the crisis communication procedures that has been carried out by Malaysia Airlines Berhad (MAS) pertaining the to the twin tragedies of MH370 and MH17 and identifying some of the relevant team involvements from MAS throughout the initial phase of “code red” when the crisis first struck.

Problem Statement - Within the vast transportation sector, the aviation industry was deemed to be the one that is most vulnerable when it comes to the exposure of crises. As being noted by [1], the reasons behind aviation industry’s vulnerability are mainly due to the risks of corporate bankruptcy or even deaths in the worst-case scenario as airlines are majorly exposed to every types of crises such as financial, terrorism, financial, management failures, natural factors and so on. Thus, in order to address the crises such as MH370 and MH17 tragedies, it is important for MAS as an organization to come to a point of resolution whilst managing their crises by conducting proper and effective crisis communication approach to avoid the unwanted ending of being left as memories in the industry’s historical records. There are instances of these crisis communication failures which had rendered some of the Indonesian airlines such as Sempati Air, Boraq, Mandala and Adam Air towards bankruptcy. Ansett, one of Australia’s largest aviation industries after Qantas, had also remained as another historical record due to their failures in managing the crisis. [1], [9]

When the crisis hit MAS at the first scene, MAS had come under intense scrutiny especially from the local and international media, the Malaysian locals, the government as well as other foreign entities. [1] To a certain extent, the media had also played the most prominent role in shaping the public opinion and

framing the rationale behind the tragedies especially during the MH370 incident [8], [10]. Local and international media at that time were considered as the primary source of information that are accessible to the general publics as they wanted clarity on the issue which unfortunately remains a mystery up to this day. These instances of vast inquiries by media and the publics at local and international settings during the MH370 tragedy had rendered the media to frame their stories according to their national interests and also based their stories on national citizenship due to MH370 tragedies involved the demise of passengers from other countries as well. [11] This situation of media framing had led the coverage for MAS crisis at that time to be surrounded and engulfed with negativity, ambiguity, conspiracies and false contending claims such as “MAS was quite slow in responding to the crisis” without knowing exactly what is going on and thus, diminishing the early emergency efforts that had been initiated by MAS at that time. [1], [11], [12]

Research Objectives - RO1: To determine crisis communication strategies and procedures including code red alert procedures at Malaysia Airlines, and **RO2:** To identify the discrepancies of media framing to the actual event situation of the MAS Twin Tower Tragedy.

2.0 Literature Review

Crisis Communication

For most of the aviation industries, reputation and image remain as one of the utmost importance towards the survival of the organization within the global markets as the aviation or airlines industries, in particular, serve various publics or stakeholders from many parts of the world. In the previous twin tragedies that befallen upon Malaysia Airlines (MAS), it was highly noted that the twin tragedies incident had attracted most of the media’s attention be it local or international as media attempts to conduct scrutiny over what was happening thus, resulting in the varied ‘framing’ on story of the incidents as well as inducing different public reactions [13]. Some media like *daily.com* also attempted to criticize MAS efforts in dealing with the crisis as rather slow compared to other airline companies like AirAsia at that time. [14] Due to this notion, it is vital for airline organization such MAS to bring forth a communicative approach to address the crisis, informing about the organizational attitudes towards the crisis as well as outlining proactive measures and solutions as the media coverage is already wide-spreading and started to influence various stakeholders’ perceptions on MAS. [1]

It is stipulated that as the organizational crises creates demands for information, thus communication remains the crucial part in crisis knowledge management process and stakeholder reaction management. [3] Crisis communication process can be categorized into three phases namely *pre-crisis phase*, *crisis response phase* and *post-crisis communication*. [3] *Pre-crisis phase* connotes crisis communication on reputation building prior to crises, locating, preventing and reducing the risk of the anticipated crises. [15], [16] Meanwhile, during the *crisis response phase* is the instance where crisis communication practitioners emphasized quick response, accuracy and consistency during the first hour of the crisis. Hence, it is wise for the organization to initiate the first proactive step in addressing the crisis rather than remaining silent and let the media be the first to deliver the information. The moment when the media controls the early flow of information is dubbed as “stealing thunder” effect, and the reputational damage will be even greater if the media become the source of information during the crisis. [17], [18] The final phase which is *post-crisis communication* is suggests that crisis communication in managing the after-effect of the crisis to continue even after the crisis is resolved and as the organization starts to return to normal operation. [3] This post-crisis communication can be conducted through organizational learning as crises provide opportunities for organization to grow, be prepared and improved in the same circumstances in the future. [19].

It has been outlined several key research trends to be implemented when the crises strike such as informal crisis communication research, transition crisis communication research and formal crisis communication research. [3] Within the *informal crisis communication discipline*, there are mainly three schools of thoughts pertaining to how to respond to crisis such as (1) corporate apologia, (2) image restoration and (3) renewal. Corporate apologia is a rhetorical concept to use communication for self-defense via four strategies such namely *denial*, *bolstering*, *differentiation* and *transcendence*. [20] On the other hand, image restoration suggests the use of communication to defend reputations by utilizing the image restoration theory (IRT) framework. The renewal rhetoric is rather different from corporate apologia and IRT as it emphasizes more on a positive view of organization's future rather than remaining cooped up in the present situation. [21]

Apart from *informal crisis communication research*, the transitional crisis communication research offers a notion that crisis response strategies can be derived from content analysis using past literatures as sources such as media reports, messages from organization and messages from social media. [22] In [23], used content analysis to examine how crisis managers should be a part of the stories covered by the media during a crisis. Meanwhile, in [24] stipulated that from their content analysis findings, the Internet, new media tactics and organizational websites are currently trending for crisis response purposes.

The *formal crisis communication research* attempts to go further within the study of crisis communication response by seeking prediction and control of the relationships between the variables and eventually developing a predictive ability of crisis communication. [25] In general, *formal crisis communication research* highlights the shift of focus from the sender to the audience by examining how the audience react to the crisis events and the crisis response strategies such as *denial*, *scapegoating*, *attack the accuser*, *excuses*, *justification*, *ingratiation*, *concern*, *compassion*, *regret* and *apology*. [3], [26]

MAS Twin Tragedies

Aviation tragedies are not new for Malaysia as there were already several incidents prior to the 'twin tragedies' such as the crash of flight Double Six on June 6, 1976 which killed the Chief Minister of Sabah, Tun Fuad Stephens at that time. Next, it was followed by the crash of a domestic flight Boeing 737-200 which resulted in casualties of 93 passengers and 7 crew members at Tanjung Kupang, Johor. On September 15, 1995 Malaysia Airlines flight MH2133 had also crashed resulting in the deaths of 32 passengers. [27] However, nothing compares as mysterious and as controversial as the two incidents that has befallen upon Malaysia Airlines (MAS) namely the disappearance of MH370 and MH17 that was shot down which had severely affected MAS's reputation as both of these tragedies happened within a short time frame, initially begun with the loss of MH370 on 8 March 2014 and followed up by the MH17 on 17 July 2014, that both of these tragic losses eventually dubbed as 'twin tragedies' in the Malaysian aviation history. [28], [29], [30]

The first tragedy of MH370 started with the mysterious disappearance from the radar at 1.30 a.m, just about one hour after the flight took off as the flight was scheduled to arrive at Beijing at 6.40 a.m. [7], [11] The flight MH370 carried 227 passengers from 14 different countries and 12 Malaysian crew members [11]. As the investigation continued added with the media speculations, public confusions as well as the unknown status of the plane's actual location and the debris, hence the disappearance of flight MH370 has been widely recognized by the world as more international media started to highlight the stories and also involved the multinational search efforts and rescuing assets which were later deployed by the governments of Malaysia, Vietnam, China, United States of America and Australia. [7], [31], [32], [33], [34] Despite all of these, the actual fate and location as well as the recovery of the complete debris has yet remained unknown up to this day.

About five months after the disappearance of MH370, MAS had once again encountered another plane disaster and this time it was flight MH17 which was shot down over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014. The flight MH17 was scheduled to depart from Amsterdam's Schipol Airport on the same day the tragedy happened and was anticipated to land in Kuala Lumpur International Airport at 6 am on the following day but fate has got to it earlier, thus sending MAS and the Malaysian publics with yet another huge shockwave pertaining to what has already happened at that time [7]. It was officially declared that the flight carried more than 290 passengers including the flight crews and none of them survived the disaster. [7], [35] The incident deduced as an accident due the official reports stating that flight MH17 was shot down by Pro-Russia separatists near the Ukraine border by using surface-to-air Buk missile as it was being mistakenly assumed as hostile aircraft. [36] After the incident, MAS had been bombarded with enormous scrutiny by the publics and various media attentions all around the globe especially the Dutch media. [37] Despite these preliminary allegations, the Russian government insists on denying their affiliation to this incident. [7]

Code Red Alert

On 14th March 2014, at around 3:45am to 4:00am MAS Operation Control Centre (OCC) issues a code red alert to request Air Traffic Control (ATC) Vietnam and ATC HKG to verify the location of their missing MH370 and later at 4:26am an SMS blast was sent to all Emergency Operation Center (EOC) members in order to call in all the related personnel to standby at the airport. [38] On 18th February 2018, one of the Jet2 flights traveling from Lanzarote to Birmingham issued a code red alert which forced them to make an emergency landing with nearly 200 passengers on board due to a medical emergency when the co-pilot on the flight had fallen ill. [39] Earlier, on 11th August 2006, the US posted an unprecedented code red alert for passengers on flights from Britain to the United States where all liquids are banned from all carry-on bags. Recently on 25th May 2021. A Ryanair pilot had to make an emergency landing in Belarus enroute from Greece to Lithuania when they received a code red alert due to an alleged bomb threat on board. [40]

This color-coded alert was started in 2001 followed by the terror attack on Sept 11 2001. [41] Generally, "Code Red" is usually followed by terrible news or very bad situations and is used to inform that there is a true emergency on the plane or with it and should be taken very seriously. [42] "Red" is taken as the highest alert to aviation and this also includes weather related threats such a volcano eruption with significant emission of ash into the atmosphere which could potentially clog the engines and cause them to malfunction or stop working altogether or heavy snowfall that could disrupt the view or freeze the plane or engine. [43], [44]

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

The Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) looks into response strategies that can be done by organizations to handle crises by underlining the path for crisis communication as well as what action is needed by the organization based on the situation. [45] In other words, SCCT posits that the choices for crisis response that managers make during a crisis are heavily influenced by the situation itself. [46] According to [45], an event that is considered as a valid situational crisis must be 1) a threat to the business, 2) unexpected 3) force the company to make quick decisions and 4) pose a reputational risk.

According to Coombs [46], SCCT drew on attribution theory that believes that people search for causes of events, especially negative ones, and would typically choose the one they feel most satisfying to them with generally being the external factors (the environment) or the internal factors (the people involved in the incident) and that these happens naturally with very little evidence. And due to the nature of crises - negative events that people want to know what actually happen, it makes it very likely to trigger attribution. [46] An important key to this is responsibility for the event, and SCCT uses responsibility to link the crisis situation and crisis response strategy.

Research has shown three variables that could affect crisis responsibility which is crisis type, crisis history and performance history. *Crisis type*, as elaborated by Coombs [46] is the frame used to define the crisis usually by media; both traditional and social, generally falls into three categories; 1) *Victim Crisis Cluster* (very low attribution of crisis responsibility) such as natural disasters, false rumors, workplace violence and product tampering / malevolence. 2) *Accidental Crisis Cluster* (minimal attributions of crisis responsibility) such as challenges by stakeholders, challenges on moral or ethical grounds, or technical error product harm, and 3) *Intentional Crisis Cluster* (strong attributions of crisis responsibility) such as human error accidents, human error product harm, or organizational misdeed (knowingly break the law or put stakeholders at risk). On the other hand, *crisis history* is concerned about whether the organization have had similar crises in the past and *performance history* relates to past situation - how well or poorly the organization has treated their stakeholders - which mainly is concern with the organization's reputation before the crisis.

Amaresan [45] highlighted four types of response strategies 1) Rebuilding strategy - rebuild relationship with stakeholders by redeeming reputation, done by taking responsibility for the crisis and offering compensation and apologies, most frequently used in accidental crises. 2) Diminish strategy - minimize the amount of responsibility on the organization by justifying and offering excuses, most frequently used as a response to victim crises where the company is not at fault, 3) Deny strategy - completely re-assigns blame away from the organizers, done by confronting accuser(s) for invalid accusations, claiming that there is no crisis or blame another party for the crisis, usually used in victim crisis when faced with harmful rumors or accusation and 4) Bolster strategy - position the organization as an asset to stakeholders by reminding them of the good deed or positive aspect of the organization and praising stakeholders for their loyalty and dedication, and can be used in conjunction with other primary crisis strategy.

3.0 Methodology

This study will be done as a qualitative study where the research will be looking into the actual event that has happened during the disappearance of MH370 and also during MH17 tragedy with the focus of the Malaysia Airlines crisis communication. In order to describe, interpret and understand this social phenomenon, this study will be taking the interpretive social studies paradigm.

This research will be using case study approach where in-depth interview is done with an expert, which is Dato' Najmuddin Abdullah, the then Senior Vice President & Head of Strategic Communications at Malaysia Airlines who was personally involved in and leading the Emergency Operation Committee (EOC) of Malaysia Airlines during the twin tragedies.

A thematic analysis and constant comparison strategy with open sources will be carried out upon the data gathered and themes are extracted in fulfilling the aim of the study.

4.0 Findings

Three overarching themes were identified:

TABLE 1
Thematic Analysis Coding Template

Theme	Sub-theme	Theme Description
Crisis communication procedures	Crisis declaration	The point whereby early detection of crisis occurred and declaring the situation when crisis is identified
	Team deployment	The roles designated to a specific relevant team to manage tasks during the crisis
	Media Utilization	The communication flow across media platforms to initiate crisis awareness and situational conditions
	Stakeholder engagement	The extent where organization conveys information to the publics through press conference or press releases
Crisis communication strategies	Pre-crisis strategies	The extent where organizations conducts simulations, trainings and crisis preparedness plans
	Mid-crisis and “code red” strategies	The proper execution of planned strategies when the crisis struck the organization
	Post-crisis strategies	The recovery efforts in rebuilding the reputation and gaining social supports by the organization
Media discrepancies	timeliness	Allegation that indicates that the news release done by Malaysia Airlines was late but in actual case is not
	assumption	circulation of fake news and conspiracy theories are based on assumptions

4.1 Malaysia Airlines’ Crisis Response Procedures:

The earliest form of crisis response conducted by MAS when the crisis first strike was to gather all of the verified and reliable information from the respective counterparts and authorities before rushing into making earlier announcement of the crisis itself as MAS needed to make sure if they were in a truly legitimate situation to consider it as ‘crisis’. This was done by MAS during the earlier moments of MH370 disappearance from the radar by contacting the Department of Civil Aviation (DCA) or currently known as the Civil Aviation Authority of Malaysia (CAAM) which is a government agency formed under the Ministry of Transport Malaysia that works closely with many airline organizations.

“In case of MH370, the aircraft went missing at about 1:30 a.m. and 1:45 a.m. and then I sent the first press statement at 7 a.m. You may ask me why didn't I sent it earlier? It goes like this, when you lost contact with the aircraft, you can't just directly declare it as a crisis.”

“As we can't reach to MH370, the DCA in Thailand, err sorry...the DCA in Vietnam called DCA in Subang informing that MH370 did not enter the Vietnam's airspace. As you can see, there's lots of work going on as later DCA Malaysia had to contact DCA in Cambodia, call the DCA in Thailand, DCA in Singapore and all other DCAs in the area”

In general, DCA acts as the agency which monitors every flight schedule, authority to departs and safety. As MAS had established contact with DCA and really confirmed that flight MH370 as truly missing, only then MAS was obliged to execute their next step which to activate the Emergency Operation Committee (EOC) and officially declaring the situation as “code red” as the crisis was already identified.

During the time of crisis for many vital industries, especially in the aviation industries such as MAS, the organization will be required to operate in a different mode altogether and it will no longer be operating in business-as-usual mode depending on the types and situation of the crisis that struck.

“Do you know that during crisis, organization operates at different mode and it's not business-as-usual? It's totally different as when crisis struck, it will be declared and when it was declared then the Emergency Operation Committee (EOC) will be activated”

“In the special cases in crisis management like the one with MH370, at 2 a.m we have something called as Emergency Operation Centre (EOC) which will operate when a crisis happened”

In this case MAS crisis identification at that time can categorized under *the accidental cluster* as being proposed by [4]. When both incidents of MH370 disappearance and MH17 crash occurred, MAS as an organization has rendered its whole organizational mode in an “emergency” state whereby the Emergency Operation Committee (EOC) was being officially activated to supervise and manage various magnitudes during the crisis communication and crisis management process. EOC came as the most powerful division during the time of crisis for MAS, for instance when MAS was hit by the MH370 tragedy, EOC conducts all of the vital roles in decision-making, planning and tasks execution as the role of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) was no longer viable in emergency state.

“In EOC, there will always be its own leader called as ‘Crisis Chairman’ or ‘Emergency Chairman’. This position is usually held by the Director of Flight Operation and not the CEO himself”

It can be definitely stipulated from this instance that MAS had ventured into its second step of crisis response phase right after they received the earlier news of MH370 disappearance for which the implementation of EOC marks initiation of response in dealing with the crisis. The EOC activation in MAS earlier stage of crisis response allows MAS to manage the most critical moments where uncertainty, disorientation or confusion manifests the situation. Apart from that, the EOC activation by MAS which supervises all organizational conducts during MH370 tragedy also supports the notion by [2] which outlines that in time of crises, organization needs to alter the course from their routine functions and focuses extensively on the more specific tasks of monitoring and addressing the crises.

The next step that has been taken by MAS in responding to the crises, is to utilize their organizational website and emergency alert system via short-messaging services (SMS) to communicate internally pertaining to crisis magnitude and “code red” alert to all of their internal employees to ensure that every employee that was working with MAS at that time was aware and supplied with the information of the existing crisis.

“As the EOC has been activated, that’s how the EOC will blast the standard SMS to all EOC members to report for duty; ‘Code Red, Code Red, Code Red! This is an emergency. We have lost contact with MH370’.”

“We are very strong in our internal communication because during crisis, during my time ya, I communicate internally even earlier than giving out the first press release as I want Malaysia Airlines staff to read it themselves through the internal portal (website) before resorting to any information on newspaper, TV or Twitter. That’s how you manage your people.”

This emergency alert system was being carried out during both MH370 and MH17 tragedies whereby MAS’ official website was being differently designed to convey the situation that MAS was experiencing and blasting the SMS on the “code red” notification to all of their employees were simply perceived as the added catalyst in developing a mutual understanding regarding the crisis as well as preparing their employees in the different working environment as the organization shifted to operate within an “emergency” state.

The final crisis response procedures foreseen MAS as the main crisis communicator whereby an organizational representative, the spokesperson in particular, will need to be deployed to address and convey the information pertaining the crises experienced by the organization.

“We have few spokespersons, as for in MH370 case, we put AJ (Ahmad Jauhari Yahya) our CEO as the spokesperson. For MH17 case, AJ was overseas at that time, so we had to put Captain Izham as the spokesperson.”

MAS was mainly obliged to address the crisis magnitude, for instance during the tragedy of MH370, as it involves loss of lives. Hence, the media as well as the family and kins of the victims were considered as the mandatory publics or audience that needed to be conveyed with sympathetic piece of information and updates towards the proactive solutions in dealing with the crisis. [4]

As the public, the media and various stakeholders dwell more into the severity and uncertainty of information imposed by the crisis such as what happened during MH370 and MH17 tragedies, the publics and media would demand further clarifications from the organization especially if the crisis involved serious damage or loss of lives. Thus, this moment marks the vital need for crisis communication in order for MAS to address all of the relevant and valid information to the publics and media. In doing so, MAS has had so many press conferences sessions and press releases distributed to the media and the publics when MH370 and MH17 crises happened. In this situation, all of the information presented by MAS’ spokesperson and the press releases while addressing the crisis were anticipated to be the most recent, truthful, accurate and quick.

“As the plane was only carrying one hour of extra fuel, it must land somewhere by 7:30 am. But the fact that MH370 still wasn’t reported to land anywhere at that time, that’s why we sent our first press release at 7:34 a.m. as it was deduced and confirmed that it won’t land ever again.”

“But the statements in first press release did never mention that the plane was crashed or whatnot firsthand, we only stipulated we had lost contact with MH370 and will announce with further information. There are lots of procedures involved in the crisis but the main principle was to be quick.”

This notion supports the idea of Zafra and Maydell [47] and Henderson [48] which stated that truthful information and speed of information dissemination to the publics are the most essential determinants in crisis communication as it provides the organization the opportunity to control and facilitate the media agenda.

4.2 Malaysia Airlines Crisis Communication and Response Strategies:

To be concise pertaining the crisis communication strategies used by MAS during the twin tragedies, it is crucial to note that crisis communication strategies for most organizations though different and varied according to the type of industries, are generally categorized under several stages or phases as being stipulated by [3]. The first phase of the crisis communication strategies is known as the pre-crisis phase, the second phase is called as the crisis response phase, mid-crisis phase or the notable “code red” phase as this term was being coined by MAS to explain this phase. The final phase whereby the recovery and continuity from the crisis take place are being known as the post-crisis phase.

“There are lots of stages involved in when the crisis occurs, there’s no such thing as a crisis then non-crisis, no. There has to be different steps. The one that I shared with you earlier was the “code red” section alone. After the code red, then we will enter the pre-recovery phase. From pre-recovery which also has its own distinct process, only then we will eventually enter the recovery and continuity phase and finally the business-as-usual phase.”

Pre-Crisis Phase

In the pre-crisis phase MAS had utilize the optimum efforts and expenditure towards the crisis preparedness, crisis planning as well training and simulations amongst its significant employees who are deemed to be in charge when the real crisis strikes and this may potentially be its most potent pre-crisis communication strategy which was adopted by MAS. Apart from crisis preparedness and simulations, MAS also has had their own crisis communication plan or manual that they their crisis management team needed to refer to when the crisis strike and this manual will regularly be updated and revised after every crisis to improve its relevance. This crisis preparedness, planning and simulations and the organized teams as used by MAS prior to any crisis supports the notions by [3] who stated concerns for crisis communication is reflected in spokesperson trainings and team decision-making skills.

“In the aviation industry, we will always have a proper crisis plan with manual alone about this thick and all of us must read form end-to-end and thus, must be able to understand the whole process and whatnot”

“And then we also have trainings on quarterly basis and we do it as simulations. It is well rehearsed to say. Let’s assume this quarter we make simulations of a plane crash at sea, and then the next quarter we make different simulations such as the plane being hijacked.”

Crisis Response / Code Red Phase

MAS had conducted various efforts in responding to the situation when the twin tragedies hit, for instance MAS has utilized all of their social media platforms to convey the updated information pertaining to MH370 disappearance and MAS had also initiated its own internal process of investigating, determining and verifying the status of MH370 when it was first reported missing from the radar by reaching out to DCAs throughout the region. In Addition to these, MAS also responded to the crisis by giving out regular press releases and daily press conferences which were facilitated by the particular spokesperson to supply the information to the publics as well as improving media engagements when MAS was being directly scrutinized. The most notable crisis response efforts during MH370 tragedy were the fact that MAS has deployed its team of ‘caregivers’ to every kin of the victims involved to soothe the feelings and to give motivational supports added with the instance that MAS also provided hotel accommodations for the affected families. On the other hand, MAS also greatly shown their concerns and sympathy by customizing their website in a ‘mourning’ mode which resulted the website to appear in black and white and with absence of fancy and promotional campaigns, MAS also decided to withdraw all of their commercial advertisements from TV and newspaper when MH370 crisis struck as MAS wanted to signify their utmost concerns to the affected families and showing their determination in dealing with the crisis during the “code red” phase. Basically all of these crisis response efforts carried out by MAS during the “code red” phase can be closely attributed as appropriate justifications in addressing the crisis which falls under the cluster of *diminish strategy* that supports the notion made by Coombs [49], [3] in his related work on Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) whereby it was stipulated that *diminish strategy* seeks to minimize the organization’s crisis responsibility or to even reduce the severity of the crisis.

“During crisis we don’t have lots of information, right? That’s why when crisis happened, we will distribute information on our Twitter, we give media statement and we wrote as ‘more details to follow’”

“The moment an aircraft starts to take off, airline company is no longer in charge. It’s the DCA and every country has its own DCA. So it’s the DCA who will communicate about the flight status”

“HR roles during this time was to activate the volunteers called as ‘caregivers’ when the crisis happened and these volunteers will be assigned for every victim’s family.”

“Malaysia Airlines’ website during that time it has two-appearance, on the normal day we use the normal interface but during the crisis I shifted to other side of black and white interface as if we were mourning”

“It was well-planned, for example, MAS had two big billboards but during the MH370 crisis, MAS immediately covered both big billboards with white backgrounds on the same day”

Post-Crisis Phase

The post-crisis phase for MAS is recognized as the recovery and continuity phase as it was coined by most of its employees. During this phase post-crisis phase for MH370 tragedy, MAS emphasized on rebuilding back their corporate image and reputation which has been tarnished and MAS had to double up their image restoration and brand building efforts as MAS also had been hit with the MH17 tragedy not long after MH370. This back-to-back crisis on MAS increased the severity of the problems it faced and

they had to contribute even more towards business recovery. In addition, MAS also created #StayStrong campaign to induce social supports to MAS and also invited a Malaysian Singer, Yuna who specifically came up with her song titled as “Langit” back in 2014 to become MAS’ official ambassador as well as organizing a mass prayer session which involves all religious beliefs to portray ‘solidarity’ amongst the publics and that MAS was adamant despite the hardships that they had gone through. [50] In this sense, it can be generalized that MAS had ventured into the *rebuild strategy* as being proposed within SCCT paradigm with the purpose of improving the publics perceptions and reputations towards the organization by projecting MAS’ deepest concerns, compassion and regret on what had happened during the crisis. [3]

“We created #Stay Strong at that time so every few days we will publish different pictures along with slogans and I made it as social media postings”

“So, I used the same branding philosophy during the pre-recovery. In this pre-recovery, I invited Yuna at that time and she was our ambassador who came up with song “Langit” which was intendedly created for Malaysia Airlines.”

“After that if you remember, we also have this ‘solidarity’ buttons as well as ribbons that all Malaysia Airlines staff wear”

“And then during this pre-recovery transition, we organized prayer session for all religious beliefs at MAS Academy where we gather the Buddhist, and whatever religion lah. For the Muslims we organize Yaasiin recitation and Solat Hajat...”

4.3 Discrepancies of Media Framing to the Actual Event Situation

The Malaysia Airlines MH370 disappearance was the first of such a tragedy that has ever happened in the history of aviation in Malaysia and paired with the MH17 tragedy, it is the first twin tragedies that the world has ever seen. During the period of when these two tragedies became the main focal of the media, several discrepancies and misunderstanding occurred due to the framing that the media has taken. This study will compare some of the main discrepancies based on the interview result with the respondent.

Malaysia Airlines has given a delayed news responding to the disappearance of MH370

The Flight MH370 was reported missing from the radar less than an hour after their departure from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing, however, the first news in response to the disappearance was released only approximately six hours after that. This, according to Othman & Yusoff [51], violated the SCCT recommendation which emphasized on giving quick, accurate and consistent responses. This gap of timely news release by the airlines was seen as the main reason as to why there were inaccurate or misleading news being released earlier than the official news release.

However, according to the respondent, this information is not accurate in the sense that the news release at the time was not “late” as what is perceived by the media and the mass, rather it is timely, and appropriate. The news can only be released at that time after they are really sure that MH370 will not make an appearance.

“The aircraft went missing at around 1:30 to 1:45 in the morning and then I sent out my first press statement at 7:34 in the morning. But you may ask, why didn’t I send out a statement at 2am? It’s like this, when you first lose contact with an aircraft you can’t immediately declare a crisis. Sometimes, we lose contact with aircrafts because they are flying over the sea. When they are flying over the sea, of course the satellite coverage may be lacking... we could lose contact anywhere.

Just because you can't contact an aircraft, it doesn't mean that the aircraft is lost or crashed."

"When DCA in Vietnam called DCA in Subang informing that MH370 did not enter the Vietnamese Air Space, so DCA in Subang call MH370, but couldn't connect. At the same time DCA in Vietnam also try to contact MH370 but couldn't connect. Then DCA in Subang called Malaysia Airlines informing them that they lost contact with the aircraft. Then Malaysia Airlines tried to contact MH370 but also could not connect. Then Malaysia Airlines contacted other aircrafts that are flying in the area, some coming back from Japan, Hong Kong and going back to China etc, so there was a lot of work being done in the background.... They called all the DCA's in the area just in case they can see MH370 in their Airlines "

"What I am saying is that, although the lost contact happened at 1:30, 1:45 in the morning, but a lot of work in the background to search for the MH370. As to why the announcement, the first statement only happened later in the morning simply because the aircraft was on the way from KLIA to Beijing. The aircraft was scheduled to arrive in Beijing at 6:30 in the morning and the aircraft carried extra fuel for one hour. Nowadays, aircraft can no longer bring too much extra fuel due to the threat of hijacking. In the case of a hijack, the one hour extra fuel will only allow the aircraft to go as far as the next landing site and not further. So, when we take a flight, all of the planes have a secondary airport, meaning in any case of emergency... they have another airport to land in case they could not land at their original destination."

"So since the aircraft bring one hour of extra fuel, it means that MH370 must land by 7:30am at any of the airports. If they don't land, that means the aircraft is gone, or crashed. So, that is the very reason we sent out the press release that we lost contact with the plane at 7:34 because it is confirmed that it didn't land anywhere. In fact, before the press release, we were in contact with our teams in Beijing, Hong Kong and in the other airlines in the area who were waiting just in case the aircraft came at the last minute."

Conspiracy Theories and Fake News

Due to the mysterious nature of MH370 disappearance, many conspiracy theories and fake news appeared in the media, especially on social media. Furthermore, these conspiracy theories were also debated on mainstream media and received a strong interest from the mass. Among conspiracy theories and fake news that has received a lot of attention are;

A website called World News Daily Report (WNDR) released a satirical news report claiming that the pilot of MH370 Captain Zaharie Ahmad Shah has reappeared in Taiwan was recovering in Taipei Adventist Hospital with severe amnesia. Despite the website having a disclaimer that this news is entirely fictional, nevertheless, the article went viral and many people believed the news. [52]

Not long after MH370 disappearance, videos with titles such as "Malaysia Airlines missing flight MH370 sound in Sea - 50 people alive saved" have spread through social media. The video claimed that the plane was found in the Bermuda Triangle, however according to blogger Brett M. Christensen, the photos used in the video was from the April 2013 Lion Airplane crash near Bali. This link was used to gain personal information of the viewers by hackers to execute scams. [53]

In March 2014, news that MH370 had safely landed in China started to surface on twitter. Some sources cited Nanning China as the landing site while some cited Nanming Vietnam. Other variations

include the plane had run out of fuel and had either landed or crashed in mainland Malaysia. This news was then refuted by Malaysia's transport minister that says no sign of plane wreckage on 8th March 2014. [54]

Other conspiracy theories includes; Captain Zaharie's tryst with a secret lover on a boat where he parachuted out of the plane as his plan to escape his marriage, depressurisation of the cabin which killed all the passengers and crew and left only co-pilot alive flying the plane for hours before crashing in the Indian Ocean, cyber hijacking from the hacking of the Boeing's Honeywell Un-interruptible Autopilot on-board computer on MH370 as the plane have been carrying sensitive materials or personnel to Beijing, MH370 was taken by North Korea and many more. [55]

All these theories were backed up with seemingly logical series of deductions. However, according to the respondent, this is all just speculation and assumption.

"We did not derive any conclusion on the disappearance of MH370. Because, if we derive anything, that means we are making assumptions, and we cannot make assumptions. Because everything needs to be supported by verified information, In the case of MH17, we managed to recover black box. So we knew what happened. All aircraft are equipped with two Blackbox, one in the cockpit that records all the conversations that happened, and another one is at the tail that records all the mechanics of the aircraft in case there are any short circuits or malfunctions in the aircraft. So, these two Blackbox are very crucial to be recovered to know what exactly happened. For as long as you do not recover these Blackbox201, you cannot make an assumption because you do not know as you were not there."

5.0 Conclusion

During a crisis, well planned crisis communication procedures could save an organization a lot of effort and in the case of some industries, it could save lives. In the aviation industry, large tragedies happened very rarely due to the amount of effort, preparation, and professionalism that is integrated to every aspect of the industry itself, However, such tragedies as the Malaysia Airlines twin tragedies, although unprecedented, do happen and in such cases, the aviation industry around the world need to have a proper plan and execute training to prepare all the employees to handle such crisis. The communication department especially needs to be thoroughly aware of the standard operational procedure as they play an important part not only to liaise with the external stakeholders and the media, but also within the organization itself so as to ensure no miscommunication could happen and to avoid chaos and panic. The role of the communication team is crucial not only before and during crisis but also after crisis to ensure that the organization could recover and continue functioning after the crisis.

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