

# Framing crisis response messages on Facebook: a second level agenda analysis of MH370

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**Abstract.** A crisis can certainly bring great threats to an organisation. In time of crisis, what the organisation says and does may impose significant effect on the organisation's effort to survive its reputational damages. Although crisis responses are considered a common topic, this rapidly growing field of research is however vital to be critically explored. In light of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) [1] and the Second-level Agenda Setting approach [2], this study seeks to analyse the message frames used by Malaysia Airlines System (MAS) in the formation of MH370 crisis response messages that were disseminated directly to the organisation's stakeholders on Facebook. The convergence of framing and second level agenda setting has made this study significant as it advances the explication of potential crisis communication effects by underscoring the distinct importance held by certain attributes and frames, in the content of a crisis response message. This paper also includes discussion on the directions for future research on crisis response strategies particularly in the local context.

## 1 Introduction

Crises are taken as threat to every organisation's reputation. When a crisis strikes, the organisation's reputation can, to a great extent, be lost. Crisis that is sudden and unexpected can, in any form, powerfully disrupts an organisation's operations and poses both economic and reputational threat. In Malaysia, there were few notable organisational crises that can be reviewed throughout the first half to end of 2014 alone. Among Malaysia's most high profiled ones was the tragedy of Malaysia Airlines' flight MH370. Malaysian Airline System (MAS) Berhad or currently known as Malaysia Airlines Berhad (MAB) is a major airline, operating flights domestically and internationally. Malaysia Airlines is the flag carrier of Malaysia and a member of the Oneworld airline alliance. For the purpose of this paper, the studied organisation is still referred to by its previous name – MAS, taking into consideration that it was how the organisation was known and addressed as, during the hit

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of the crisis. MH370 was a scheduled international passenger flight that disappeared on 8 March 2014, while flying from Kuala Lumpur International Airport near Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to Beijing Capital International Airport in Beijing, China. The flight last made voice contact with air traffic control at 01:19 MYT (17:19 UTC, 7 March) when it was over the South China Sea, less than an hour after take-off. The tragic disappearance of Flight MH370 with a total of 239 passengers and crew members would be the second deadliest incident involving a Boeing 777 and the second deadliest incident in MAS history of establishment [3].

Crises are indeed inevitable for organisations regardless of their size, reputation or the industry they operate in. Any crisis situation, whether it is accidental, legal, financial or otherwise, will in turn forces organisations to establish a successful crisis response strategy that can help to control the damage and scope of crisis at hand. In surviving such damage, an organisation at an immediate effect, should implement crises response strategies (CRS). The scope of this study is to examine the framing of the actual messages that was disseminated by MAS to the public on Facebook in response to the mysterious disappearance of flight MH370 on the 8th March 2014. The findings reported in this paper is a preliminary result of a longitudinal study conducted to investigate how crisis response messages are framed and to determine the suitability of the strategies applied by the organisation when responding to the crisis. Parallel to this objective, this research content analyses a total of 7 statements that were released on the MAS official Facebook page on the day of the crisis. From the perspective of Second Level Agenda Setting Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory [1], this study analyses the two dominant message frames that were used in the formation of Malaysia Airline's MH370 crisis response messages – Information and Compassion.

## **2 Facebook in disseminating crisis response messages**

According to Nel [3], 'the first data should, if at all possible, be provided within 1 hour after the event happened'. This is when communication platforms like the social media like Facebook can become strategically important. Facebook allows active communities to form online, which then increases the responsibility of organisations to manage and respond to a crisis effectively. With its real-time messaging and message linking to networks of its millions of wide range users, Facebook if utilised effectively can to a great extent help organisations to avoid potential crises situations [4]. It presents opportunities for organisations to tell its own account of a crisis without being subjected to journalistic gatekeepers and one-sided view of the crisis as normally practiced in the press media [5].

However, if used inappropriately and ineffectively, social media like Facebook can to a great extent worsen and intensify a crisis [4]. With the interactivity facilitated by Facebook, crisis response messages that were disseminated by the organisation can be forwarded and 'shared' among stakeholders and countless people. This could bring about the possibility of the stakeholders or other Facebook users to create and spread their own version of the crisis and thus create a likelihood of a boomerang effect to the initial crisis communication effort. The spread of false or incomplete information nevertheless could also form a risk, particularly due to the inability of social media users to distinguish between facts and rumours [6] which consequently could exponentially affect the organisation's image and reputation. As the recipients of the information, the reactions of the stakeholders would differ depending on the types of frames and attributes used to construct those messages. The attention given to the frames presented in the message could then influence their responses and determine how much responsibility they should assign to the crisis and the organisation involved [1].

### **3 Message Frames in Crisis Response Messages: Information and Compassion**

Information and Compassion are the two primary message factors that are also viewed as message frames that are used as basis to the construction of organisation's crisis response messages [7].

Information Framing is grounded by two types of information that is essential to building a strong foundation crisis response effort - Instructing Information and Adapting Information. Instructing Information are terms used to describe the information required and expected by the stakeholders to receive from the organisations in time of crises. Therefore should be communicated by the organisation directly to stakeholders, informing them on what they need to do, mainly to protect them from the physical threat of a crisis. Instructing Information is considered critical to a crisis response due to the many expectations that stakeholders build towards an organisation when a crisis strikes. This expectation is primarily in form of the amount or type of information that organisation is expected to have and provide in response to the crisis. Organisation's ability to provide the needed information will in turn cultivates the stakeholder's perception of the organisation's degree of control on the crisis. Stakeholders are believed to likely perceive positively and respond favourably towards organisations that knows what happened, and able to advice on the next course of action and provide solution [7]. For the purpose of the analysis of this study, Instruction Information is conceptualised and operationalised based on three variants: (a) the what, why, when, where, and how of information about a crisis; (b) any precautionary actions stakeholders need to take; (c) actions taken by the organisation to correct and/or end the crisis and/or to prevent a repeat of the crisis [7]. On the other hand, Adapting Information functions to help stakeholders to cope with psychological threats from the crisis (e.g psychological stress that could be caused by the situation revolving around the crisis). To cope with this, stakeholders should be supplied with information about the 'what' and 'when' of the crisis, as well as the corrective actions taken by the organisation to convince stakeholders that they are safe thus reducing their psychological threat. The final aspect of Adapting Information that organisation needs to convey is the expressions of concern to the stakeholders; however not to the extent that can indicate admissions of guilt. Only after this part is established can the organisation focus on the crisis response strategies to protecting and restoring its reputation [1,7].

Expressing concern builds credibility with victims and other stakeholders. Therefore, the organisation should acknowledge and show concern for stakeholders' needs (especially the direct victims of the crisis). The compassion suggests the organisation credibility in turn, should facilitate the development of a favourable organisational reputation. Hence, to a certain extent may overlap with the final part of Adapting Information. Crisis communications strategies in relation to compassion framing could be arrayed from helping victims (i.e. accommodative) to defending organisational (i.e. defensive). Accommodation reflects compassion and concern for victims, whereas defensive lacks compassion by denying victims' needs. As such, the term Emotional Framing (and appeal) is found to have been used interchangeably with term the Compassion Framing. Emotional Framing refers to attributes used to appeal to the readers' emotions in form of words that expresses feelings (e.g. love and sad) [8]. Emotional Framing is usually executed by using drama as well as subjective and evaluative properties [9]. However, parallel to Coombs [7] the analysis will be conducted using the term Compassion Framing.

## **4 Analysing Crisis Response Message Frames: A Second Level Agenda Setting Approach**

The explication of a second level agenda setting links closely with the process of framing. From the perspective of second level agenda setting, a frame is conceptualised as ‘the central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration [2]. The two types of message frames used in crisis communication – Information and Compassion Framing comprises of particular attributes and different emphasis to the construction of a message [1, 7]. In other words, each frame is built upon the certain facts or values in form of attributes that are made salient and emphasised in the crisis response message by the organisation to the stakeholders [10].

Studies on framing usually further examine the attention of readers on the emphasized attributes and the opinions made in result to the attention given to the message [11]. Attributes as defined in the agenda setting theory, are ‘characteristics and traits that fill out the picture of the object’; and thus at this level, the attributes emphasised over other elements that is believed could consequently influence the reader’s perception of the message presented [12]. A handful of studies even have applied the second level agenda setting theory in the context of business by using the organisation as the “object” of study [13]. Hereby, attributes of corporations in the media content were evaluated and used to examine the effect of images transmitted in the media on the public’s attitudes and opinions towards business firms. The theory was further pursued to measure the visibility and distinctiveness between one organisation to another, as well as in investigating issues and attributes in the study of corporate reputation [14, 15]. In similar vein, the current study applies second level agenda setting to content analyse the attributes used in the formation of messages by the crisis communication managers of MAS on Facebook in response to the disappearance of MH370.

Only a few studies to date have explored social media from a crisis communication perspective and specifically analysed the actual usage of social media by organisations for crisis management [4]. This study therefore fills the gap in literature by content analysing an actual crisis response messages in form of media statements that were released by MAS crisis communication team on Facebook to stakeholders on the day of the crisis, 8th March 2014. This research selected Facebook as the focus of the study as it is one of the prominent social media platform used by MAS in facilitating its communication effort in response to the MH370 crisis. From the perspective of Second-Level Agenda Setting Theory [2], this study conducted a thematic analysis in examining how the organisation frames crisis response messages on Facebook. The analysis performed for the purpose of identifying attributes used in the forming of Information and Compassion message frames (or interchangeably referred to as message factors) comprised of all 7 statements that were disseminated on MAS official Facebook page on 8th March 2014; hence the population of this study. This is considered sufficient taking into account the preliminary nature of this longitudinal study and the immense amount of messages released by MAS to the stakeholders throughout the conduct of the investigation since the disappearance of MH370 to the current state of the case.

Only the main page that is directly established by MAS in response to the crisis of MH370 was used for the purpose of this analysis. Other Facebook pages that were established by stakeholders or third party users or unknown sources (e.g PrayForMH370) are not considered relevant for this research. Stakeholders in the context of this analysis refer to the audience or recipient of the crisis response messages on Facebook, that probably range from victims’ families, shareholders, media watchdogs, as well as clients (i.e. existing and potential passengers) throughout the globe.

## 5 Results

The analysis considered all the attributes used in the message, whether in form of a word or words; a sentence or sentences; as long as it matches or closest to falling in the category of Information and Compassion message frames. Following Coombs [7], this study operationalised Information Frame as the what, why, when, where, and how the information about a crisis, precautionary actions that stakeholders need to take, actions taken by MAS to correct the problem, as well as straightforward and objective information; while Compassion Frame as the denial, confessing of guilt, begging victims for forgiveness, emphasis of customer welfare including compensation, as well as feelings.

Due to the interactive and personalized nature of Facebook where exchange of information activities among users are mostly conversational and casual in approach, this research considers each sentence that makes up the crisis response messages as a form of conversation established by MAS to the stakeholders. Following Bales [16] in his analysis of conversation, single sentence conveyed in each media statement is considered a single unit of analysis. This single unit of analysis will be treated as a single unit of attribute that are communicated by the organisation to form frames, in which indicates the way that an information is presented and emphasised [1] in the organisation's crisis response message. The way a message is framed can to a great extent shapes how people define a crisis, assign attributions of the responsibility to the organisation in crisis and to know the solutions to the crisis [1]. Parallel to the objective of this study, a thematic analysis of the attributes was conducted for each of the 7 statements to determine the type of framing applied in the crisis response messages released by MAS on 8th March 2014. Results of the analysis showed that the attributes used in constructing the crisis response messages on the disappearance of MH370 on that date were mainly Information. The information framing was most prominent on one particular statement (i.e 3<sup>rd</sup> statement). Prominent herein refers to being emphasised to an extent that it could draw readers' attentions to focus on the prominent attributes when forming their perception and assigning responsibility towards the organisation.

A crisis creates a need for information. Communicating the 'required' information is part of the ethical responsibilities of the organisation and as part of their effort to address their concerns to the stakeholders. Based on the analysis, the Information Framing that was applied by MAS in its crisis response messages comprised of both types of information that is essential in establishing a strong foundation to an organisation's crisis response effort - Instructing Information and Adapting Information. Based on the analysis, the Instructing Information was highlighted in every statement except for the 6th Statement, while Adapting Information was only highlighted in 1st, 2nd, 3rd and the 6th Statement. Instructing Information encompassed of 18, while Adapting Information comprised of 13 from the total of 35 attributes. This makes Instructing Information as the most highlighted frame in the overall statements released by MAS on the 8th March 2014.

The information that the organisation supplied to stakeholders were found to be in line with Coombs [1,7] characteristics to defining Instructing Information. That is, the organisation was committed to providing stakeholders with information on 1) the basic press conference details that was conducted from time to time by the Group Chief Executive Officer of MAS (i.e. date and time of info release, and link to info update in form of hashtags - #MASalert). This information was found to be the most highlighted among other information under the Instructing Information frame (i.e. mentioned in 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th and 7th Statement). Following that information is the 2) details of the missing flight (i.e. route, location of departure and the supposed location of arrival, expected time of departure and arrival, number of passengers); as well as 3) the current status of the missing flight (i.e establishment of contact). More Instructing Information

were added by the hour about the details of the missing flight (i.e. nationalities of the passengers and its respective amount; the name of the pilot and first officer, their flying hours, the year that they started working with MAS; mentioned of the flight's code share with China Southern Airlines); and status of the flight at that current time (i.e. speculation that the aircraft has landed at Nanming).

Meanwhile, the Adapting Information was found to be mostly in form of information that helps to explain the organisation's current effort to handle the crisis. The most highlighted information under this frame was on MAS's action in working with the authorities who have activated their Search and Rescue team in locating the missing aircraft. This information was consistently mentioned in 1st, 2nd, 3rd and the 6th Statement, making it the most highlighted among other 13 attributes that encompassed of the Adapting Information in the released statements. The organisation also alerted the stakeholders on their effort at that time in contacting the next of kin of the passengers and crews onboard MH370; a mention of their commitment to provide regular updates on the situation, and the effort to establish contact lines and website specifically to assist the public and the media on their queries. Immediately after the Instructing Information on the speculation that the flight has landed at Nanming was released, MAS provided further elaboration on the organisation's action in response to the speculation. Within the same statement (i.e. 3rd Statement) following the information pertaining on the speculation, the organisation informed the stakeholders on their effort to verify the authenticity of the report at that time. Also in the 3rd Statement, stakeholders were further updated on the organisation's action focus to work with the emergency responders and authorities as well to as mobilise its full support as part of the effort to handle the crisis. The organisation nevertheless put into emphasis the Adapting Information that needs to be supplied to the victims' next of kin as guideline for their further action (i.e. direction to the support facility building at KLIA and contact number for enquiry of the direction)

When a crisis hits an organisation, any group of stakeholders can basically be victims who could suffer financially, mentally, and physically. As such, every crisis response should consider expressing compassion to victims. This is because; expressing compassion builds credibility with victims and other stakeholders and in turn facilitates the development of a favourable organisational reputation [7]. Past studies suggested few crisis response strategies that could be used as guideline for organisations in expressing compassion to victims. The strategy includes Mortification (i.e. to confess guilt and beg victims for forgiveness), Super Effort (i.e. to focus on customer welfare including compensation) and Accommodative (i.e. to reflect compassion and concern for victims) [7].

There were only 2 attributes of Compassion Framing that were detected throughout the 7 statements. That is, the same attribute (i.e. our thoughts and prayers are with all affected passengers and crew and their family members) was mentioned twice in two separate statements (i.e. 2nd and 3rd Statement). This attribute reflected precisely Coombs [8] 'Accommodative' strategy to expressing compassion to stakeholders as part of the effort to assist the building of favourable organisational reputation.

However, a single attribute of Compassion Framing in the 6th Statement demonstrated the similar criteria to Adapting Information. Similar to Compassion Framing, the final aspect of Adapting Information also emphasises on the organisation's needs to express concern and compassion to the stakeholders (especially to the victims); however not in a way that can imply admissions of guilt [1, 7]. Following Bales [16] this analysis considers the 2 sentences (i.e. We understand everyone's concern on MH370 pax & crew. We're accelerating every effort with all relevant authorities to locate the aircraft) that constitutes both Compassion and Adapting Information Framing as a single thought; hence a single attribute. A similar pattern of framing was also detected in the 1st statement (i.e. We deeply regret that we have lost all contacts with flight MH370 which departed Kuala

Lumpur at 12.41 am earlier this morning bound for Beijing) where Compassion Framing overlaps with Instructing Information due to the usage of 'deeply regret' in the sentence.

## 6 Conclusion and Discussion

A crisis represents a distinct and an inevitable source of reputational threat for an organisation. Hence, it is vital for an organisation in crisis to take considerable amount of attention and effort to ensure that the stakeholders' physical and psychological needs are put to priority. This includes making sure that the stakeholders are updated with the latest information and alerts via a fast and accessible means of communication like the social media. At the same time, to adhere to the responsibility and ethics of providing accurate and consistent crisis response messages to the stakeholders, especially during the initial stage of a crisis.

The findings to the analysis of MAS's crisis response messages on the disappearance of flight MH370 on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2014 has verified that the organisation has responded in accordance to Coombs [1, 7] recommendation of crisis response strategy. The thematic analysis result of the attributes found in all the crisis response messages were mostly Information type of message frames; consisting of both Instructing Information and Adapting Information. To supply stakeholders with sufficient Instructing Information is critical to a crisis response effort. The result of this study also showed that the proportions of attributes that constructed the crisis response messages on that day encompassed of mostly Instructing Information. Based on the attributes used and type of framing applied by the organisation in responding to the crisis, it can be concluded that MAS has displayed a great sense of responsibility and ethics to the stakeholders by not making the organisation's reputation as the focus to their initial crisis communication effort. But instead, the organisation's attention was solely devoted to serving the stakeholders' needs and interest by providing the important crisis-related information as well as keeping the stakeholders updated on the immediate action taken by the organisation in their struggle to stay in control of the crisis. According to Coombs [1, 7], this should in turn cultivate positive perceptions among the stakeholders toward the organisation which could consequently contribute to the development of a favourable organisational reputation at the later stage of the crisis. Result of the analysis additionally indicated that the organisation was also expressive of the concern they have towards the stakeholders, especially the direct victims of the crisis (i.e. next of kin of the passengers and crews on board). Although low in count, the amount of attributes in the Compassion Framing, were deemed sufficient to allow the organisation to show the required degree of empathy and care towards the victims' needs. Expressing too much of compassion attributes is not encouraged especially at an early stage of crisis as it could potentially do harm to the organisation. It could be misinterpreted as organisation's admission of guilt and organisation's degree of responsibility for a crisis [1, 7].

Based on the presented findings, this research concludes that framing plays a significant role in crisis evolution and the attribution of meaning to a crisis. The way a message is framed; and the facts or values of a crisis that the frame stresses can affect an individual's interpretation, opinion and even decision towards a crisis [1]. Like a crisis response message, crisis types can also be communicated in a form of frame. Crisis types are framed by having to feature certain aspects and cues of the crisis (e.g whether or not some external agent or force caused the crisis, whether the crisis was a result of accidental or intentional actions, whether the crisis was caused by technical or human error) [17]. The cues and features of the crisis that are made salient in the organisation's crisis response message will indicate how stakeholders should interpret, respond to a crisis, and even determine how much stakeholders assign attribute responsibility for the crisis to the organisation. In the

case of the current analysis, the crisis response messages released by MAS on 8 March 2014 have not only supplied stakeholders with the information of the crisis, but have also somehow highlighted key features or cues that could allow stakeholders to have an indication on the type of crisis that they were encountering. The efficiency of SCCT guidelines concerning crisis response strategy and its suitability highly depends on the crisis type that the organisation is facing. Matching the crisis response strategy to the crisis type and framing type is highly important to ensure that the crisis communication effort to produce beneficial outcome for the organisation.

Taking into account the manifold effect of framing, this research strongly suggest for an organisation in crisis to be mindful on the way that a crisis response messages are presented especially in the interactive social media platform like Facebook. The advent of the social media in the field of crisis communication has not only provided organisations direct access to the public in disseminating information about the crisis, but it could also probably turned into a platform for the public, to collaborate in the building of a crisis frame which could even potentially create an adverse effect to the initial crisis communication effort. However, this could only be further verified with thorough analysis of the crisis response messages, its suitability as a strategy to protect the organisation's reputation, as well as stakeholders' responses toward the messages disseminated. Expansion of this study is therefore required, particularly in respect to the involvement of the MH370 crisis and its status to date; as well as the immense amount of crisis communication messages disseminated and effort that were established by MAS through multiple media platforms.

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