



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Public Relations Review



Full Length Article

Crisis in the air: An investigation of AirAsia's crisis-response effectiveness based on frame alignment

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 January 2016
Received in revised form 3 August 2016
Accepted 13 September 2016
Available online xxx

Keywords:

Crisis communication
Situational crisis communication theory
Semantic-network analysis
Frame alignment
AirAsia

ABSTRACT

This study explores the effectiveness of organisational crisis-response strategies and public online response by applying a framing perspective. This has been done to study the crash of AirAsia's flight QZ8501, in which a three-step methodological case study approach has been employed. First, a quantitative content analysis was conducted in order to identify AirAsia's (the sender) crisis-response strategy. Second, a semantic-network analysis was applied to analyse the response from the public (the receiver). Third, an extension of this semantic-network analysis was used to analyse to which extent the framing of AirAsia's online crisis communication had been aligned with the public framing of the crash. The results of the first step indicated that AirAsia predominately used an informational strategy (e.g., *Adjusting Information*). Moreover, the findings of the second and third steps revealed that there was an absence of frame alignment between AirAsia's response strategy and the public's response. Compared to the organisation, the public's reactions revealed more emotional aspects in their framing.

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1. Introduction

On 28 December 2014, the AirAsia flight QZ8501 disappeared from the radar with 162 people on board on its way from Surabaya, Indonesia, to Singapore. This tragedy demonstrates once again that no organisation can entirely avoid a crisis, despite all the efforts spent in anticipating and preventing this. In the unfortunate event of such an aviation crisis, the crash is likely to gain considerable attention from the media, the public, industry and government (Vasterman, Yzermans, & Dirkzwager, 2005). A reason for this attention is that aviation accidents are characterised by their unpredictable character and the high number of fatalities involved in one single event, which triggers extreme emotions in the public sphere such as intense grief and anger (Ray, 1999). Therefore, airlines concerned are often faced with "accusations of blame, irresponsibility, or inadequacy" (p. 1) which can severely impact their organisational reputation (Ray, 1999). This damage to their reputation can eventually lead to bankruptcy, which was recently the case with Malaysian Airlines, when it encountered two crashes within the same year (Coombs & Holladay, 2008; DeBord, 2015).

Organisations can counteract this reputational damage by using crisis-response strategies that are evidence-based (Coombs, 2007b). The most widely acknowledged and evaluated framework in the field of crisis communication is the

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Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Ki & Nekmat, 2014; Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011). SCCT is relevant because it proposes several crisis-response options so that to be effective it is advised that they are aligned with the crisis situation, crisis history, as well as the organisation's prior relationship with the public (Coombs, 2007b).

Recently, an emerging research avenue in the field of crisis communication is the focus on the concept of framing (Kleinnijenhuis, Schultz, Utz, & Oegema, 2015; Schultz, Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, Utz, & van Atteveldt, 2012; Snow, Vliegthart, & Corrigan-Brown, 2007; Van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes, & Vliegthart, 2014). An organisation's response strategy can be seen as an effort to frame a crisis situation in a certain manner to limit or prevent post-crisis reputational damage (Coombs, 2007b). Framing has been recognised to take on an important role in the evolution of crisis situations (Liu & Kim, 2011) and is acknowledged to be an intrinsic part of the SCCT (Coombs, 2007b). Despite its relevance, relatively limited research attention has been devoted to framing in the field of crisis communication (Van der Meer et al., 2014). Framing has been predominantly examined in a political context (e.g., Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Sniderman & Theriault, 2004), as well as in mass communication research (e.g., Cohen-Almagor, 2008; Scheufele, 1999). Previous studies have shown that frame alignment can be seen as an indicator of crisis-response effectiveness (Schultz et al., 2012).

Therefore, this study will argue for an approach that utilises the level of *frame alignment* between the organisation and the public's frames so as to understand the effectiveness of crisis-response strategies. In this study, frame alignment refers to a 'match' between the organisation's efforts to frame the crisis content in a certain way (e.g., in their press releases) and the way it resonates with the public's framing (adapted from Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986; Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). The central research question has been formulated as follows: "How effective was AirAsia's crisis-response strategy after the crash of flight QZ8501?"

After a review of the literature, this paper is structured as follows. First, a quantitative content analysis will be conducted to identify which crisis-response strategy AirAsia applied in order to answer the first research question. Second, a semantic-network analysis is applied to find frames used in the public's reaction to AirAsia's crisis-response to answer the second research question. Third, to answer the third research question, the organisation's crisis-response strategy and the public's reaction will be compared in terms of frame alignment.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, studies in the field of crisis communication predominantly rely on experimental research (Coombs, 2007b). The conclusions, drawn from experimental results, might not directly relate to the dynamics of an actual crisis, due to an experiment's artificial set up and sample of voluntary participants (Schwarz, 2012). This study applies an innovative method to automatically identify frames embedded in a large collection of texts and statistically tests them on their level of frame-alignment. Based on this analysis, insight can be obtained into the complex crisis dynamics after the AirAsia crash and the effectiveness of the organisation's crisis-response strategy. Second, this study also provides a detailed account of the receiver's responses to the crisis-response strategy, which will offer a more balanced and ecological valid approach. Third, by identifying and comparing the frames of the organisation and the public in an emotionally-charged crisis, this study sheds light on the role of emotions, thereby providing support for prior research that was in favour of including emotions in crisis-response (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2008; Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014).

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Corporate reputation and crisis communication

A crisis can severely impact an organisation's financial performance, return on investment, competitive advantage, and may eventually lead to bankruptcy (Coombs & Holladay, 2008; DeBord, 2015). An organisational crisis is defined in this paper as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organisation's performance and generate negative outcomes" (Coombs, 2007a, pp. 2–3). For an airline carrier, a crash tends to be the most visible form of crisis (Ray, 1999).

Crises can disrupt an organisation's on-going operations, and result in reputational damage if the organisation's communication surrounding the crisis is not dealt with effectively (e.g., Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Reputation is defined in this paper as an "individual's collective representation of images of an organisation (induced through either communication or past experiences) established over time" (adapted from Cornelissen, 2011; p. 8). These definitions illustrate that not only information from organisational sources or media outlets could have an impact on the reputation, but also information distributed by other individuals (Coombs, 2007b). The latter point becomes especially important when considering that both organisations and the public have increasingly gained power to distribute information through social media.

2.2. Crisis-response strategies for organisations: informative versus emotional?

Traditionally, scholars made a distinction between four main response categories: (1) *Deny* (2) *Diminish* (3) *Rebuild*, and (4) *Reinforce* (Coombs, 2007b). Following an initial crisis, however, the organisation's first measures should be dedicated to protecting the public, and not focussed on rebuilding the reputation (Coombs, 2007b). Therefore, the first responses issued after a crisis should be *Instructing Information* and *Adjusting Information* (Coombs, 2007b). These first responses can be considered as a Basic (*Base*) response option. The difference between these two responses is that *Instructing Information*

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