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Framing a mystery: Information subsidies and media coverage of Malaysia airlines flight 370



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ABSTRACT

This study examines from an information subsidies and framing theory perspective the media coverage of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370. Through a content analysis of Malaysian government information subsidies ($N=78$), and Malaysian ($N=155$) and Chinese ($N=93$) newspaper articles, findings include differences of crisis frames and risk roles, the absence of crisis cause did not detract from attribution of responsibility in regard to risk arbiters' potential solutions to managing the crisis, among other key findings. Implications include the need for the inclusion of an unknown crisis type to the crisis communication typologies and models and theories, as well as supporting the argument of previous studies in regard to media coverage partially determined by the country's media system and Palmlund's (1992, 2010) generic roles of societal evaluations of risk.

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1. Introduction

Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 disappeared on March 8, 2014, while flying from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to Beijing, China. The aircraft carried 12 Malaysian crew members and 227 passengers from 15 nations. Authorities confirmed in July 2015 a wing flap discovered on La Reunion, a remote Indian island, as the first recovered piece of debris from MH370. As of May 2016, five pieces from the aircraft have been found in various places in the Indian Ocean, yet little is known about the disappearance and the fate of those onboard (Associated Press, 2016; Jamieson & Ciganinero, 2015; McQuirk, 2016). In 2015, in compliance with an international agreement, the Malaysian government declared the MH370 disappearance an accident without survivors to allow insurers to pay the next of kin, which under the Montreal Convention international treaty includes an initial sum of approximately \$150,000–175,000 per deceased passenger. Although officially declared an accident, the cause of the crisis remains a mystery. Theories of mechanical failure and the nefarious plots of a rogue pilot or hijackers remain possibilities. For more than two years government agencies and private searchers have continued to examine a 46,000-square-mile part of the Indian Ocean, making this aviation investigation the most expensive in history (Australian Transport Safety Bureau, 2016; Wardell, 2014).

Examining media coverage within public relations-focused research projects is important for an organization and government in crisis because public opinions and attitudes are influenced by media reports (e.g., Coombs, 2006; Valentini & Romenti, 2011), and media coverage in different countries is critical for an organization with an international presence as negative media frames can harm a country's global image and reputation (Anholt, 2010). The disappearance of MH370

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received extensive media coverage not only because of the loss of life and surrounding mystery of cause, but also because it was an international crisis. For example, in March 2014, the Malaysian government owned almost 70% of the stock of Malaysia Airlines, which operated the aircraft, while most of the MH370 passengers were Chinese; Boeing, a corporation based in the United States, manufactured the aircraft; and the search operation has involved 26 countries with Australia taking the lead. Research suggests media from different countries report the same event differently because media coverage is partially determined by the media system in the country in which the media is located (Valentini & Romenti, 2011). Further, scholars argue national interests play a critical role in media coverage of international events (Hook & Pu, 2006). Thus, it is expected that media from different countries reported the MH370 crisis differently, and numerous scholars contend additional crisis communication research that investigates how multiple organizations in multiple countries manage crises is needed (e.g., Heath, 2010; Storie, Madden, & Liu, 2014).

In crisis situations, most formal information comes from the organization in crisis via information subsidies (Choi, 2012). The content of information subsidies is regarded as official communication from the organization, and numerous studies support that information subsidies affect media framing (e.g., Curtin, 1999; Kim & Kioussis, 2012; Turk & Franklin, 1987). Previous studies have explored the role of information subsidies in a crisis context (e.g., Choi, 2012; Fung, Namkoong, & Brossard, 2011; Lee & Basnyat, 2013; Sweetser & Brown, 2008). Also, studies have explored the impact of information subsidies on media coverage. The majority of them, however, explored a crisis with a known cause. Moreover, such studies examined the role of information subsidies in traditional corporate crises (e.g., Benoit & Brinson, 1994; Choi, 2012; Harlow, Brantley, & Harlow, 2011; Kleinnijenhuis, Schultz, Utz, & Oegema, 2013; Muralidharan, Dillistone, & Shin, 2011; van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes, & Vliegenthart, 2014), whereas there is limited research on such hybrid government crises (e.g., Lee & Basnyat, 2013), such as a national airline primarily owned by its government.

This study investigates from an information subsidies and framing theory perspective how Malaysia Airlines and its country of incorporation frame a crisis without a known cause through information subsidies to affect national and international media coverage about the crisis. Through a quantitative content analysis of Malaysia Airlines and government information subsidies ($N=78$) and Malaysian ($N=155$) and Chinese newspaper articles ($N=93$), this study explores crisis frames and risk roles in a crisis without a known cause. The current study also examines how media use information subsidies in news coverage. As a whole, the findings contribute to understanding how an organization attempts to frame a crisis without a known cause, which could influence international media coverage and global public opinion. It also contributes to the field's understanding of how a crisis without an attribution of cause maintains an attribution of responsibility for those organizations whose products and services are part of the crisis.

2. Literature review

2.1. Public relations and crisis communication

Toth (2010) suggests crisis communication as an important paradigm in public relations, and two recent studies identify the significant role of crisis communication in the public relations literature (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010; Ha & Boynton, 2014). Managing crisis situations is critical to public relations practitioners, and the development of crisis communication theory and adopting it to the practice are central to the public relations literature (Avery & Park, 2016). For more than twenty years, Coombs's (2015) situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) and Benoit's (1995) image restoration theory have been rigorously studied in crisis communication research in the field of public relations and have suggested useful recommendations for public relations practice (Avery & Park, 2016).

Crisis communication research is fundamentally about better understanding the role of communication processes in the onset, management, resolution, and meaning of crises. Crises can affect any type of organization, including government or private or hybrid organizations such as a national airline that is majority owned by its national government, and even those with good management, good products and a good reputation. Coombs (2015) developed a master list of 11 crisis types ranging from operational disruptions from disasters to organizational misdeeds.

As Coombs (2015) argues, "A crisis is the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (pp. 2–3). The key to this perspective, according to Hearit and Courtright (2004), is crises are both objective and perceptual, affect stakeholders, are unpredictable but not unanticipated, and ultimately violate stakeholders' expectations. Important to consider is "crisis management is a distinctly communicative phenomenon in which participants construct the meaning crises hold" (Hearit & Courtright, 2004; p. 205).

According to Heath and Palenchar (2013), early crisis communication paradigms emphasized source-based explanations aimed at reputation and image management and repair. They included the classic paradigm of apologia, a complex of discourse options by which atonement is championed as a resource for recovery. Many crisis communication theories and much research is concerned with the public's perception and support of the crisis-generating organization during- and post-crisis, such as SCCT and image restoration theory. Coombs (2009) notes SCCT delineates crisis response strategies of the theory through attribution theory, which is based on the process of attribution – the process of characterizing others and oneself – which is the basic process of social cognition.

From this organization as agency approach, and similar to risk communication, crisis communication has moved toward a collaborative perspective based on relationships and socially-constructed meanings of crisis generators, arbiters, and bearers

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