

## THE CHALLENGES OF MANAGING MEDIA IN THE FACE OF UNCERTAINTY

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**Abstract :** *The complexity of national crisis such as the disappearance of MH370 Malaysia airlines draws global media attention. Ineffective response by Malaysia to the media during the crisis allows numerous interpretation and speculation from a various party. Thus, this study sought to explore challenges faced by the government, particularly its spokesperson, Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein in handling media that contribute to the ineffective communication in managing crisis. Using the MH370 Malaysian Airlines accident as a case study, the exploratory descriptive approach was used where interviews were conducted with a media practitioner, crisis communication expert, and military personnel. Data from the interviews were transcribed and categorized to identify the common themes by conducting a content-analytic procedure. A number of challenges faced by Malaysia government and its spokesperson in dealing with media derived from this process are presented and described. This includes some measures to overcome the challenges. The findings of this study provide important insights for countrymen, mediators, and diplomats to reflect in order to improve the effectiveness of crisis communication, specifically in the face of uncertainty.*

**Keywords:** *National Crisis, Press Conference, Crisis Communication*

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### Introduction

Media refers to various means of communication for example, television, radio, and the newspaper. In communication, media is the storage and transmission tool used to store and deliver information or data. It is often referred to as synonymous with mass media or news media, but may refer to a single medium used to communicate any data for any purpose. Based on its definition by Christensson (2006), media in this study is also perceived as the press (person or business involved with news) or news reporting agencies.

Press Conference (PC henceforth) is the important media event used by government leaders to communicate with the media or public (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2003). It is usually held when new program and decision are to be made public, and also in connection with a more special event such as a national crisis like the disappearance of MH370 Malaysia Airlines.

Being an unprecedented event of world history, the disappearance of MH370 Malaysia airlines has caught the media attention from all over the world. Malaysia has been criticized for its handling of the PCs, particularly its communication to the media and families of the victims on board. It was reported in Astro Awani, dated 12 March 2014 that PCs on MH370 Malaysian Airlines accident were seen as “a series of faulty occasion with sketchy information, sometimes contradictory, and spokesperson not answering questions”. Consequently, a huge number of audiences who watched the PCs, including the families of the victims expressed their anger and questioned the trustworthiness of the information.

PC is a media event that demand an active exchange of information in which speakers are usually judged by the way they present themselves and interact with others. The forms and means of information delivered by spokespeople shape the audience’s perception towards Malaysia Airlines and Malaysia. Since its success generally reflects Malaysia government capability, this paper sought to find out the challenges dealing with ambiguity faced by the spokesperson during MH370 Malaysian Airlines PCs as to perceive what lessons there are to be learnt for the future.

### **Literature Review**

Managing media and issues related are notable for research since media is the most powerful tool of communication for the government in managing crisis, according to which the public appraise the government’s administrative ability and achievement (Yuan et. al, 2011). In the context of this study, managing media includes PC as the media event and press agencies involved in the PCs, as well as its location or place.

A review literature on media revealed various issues and variables were studied regarding crisis management, for instance social media tools, message content, strategies use, timely response, connectivity and others.

Veil et al. (2011) for example put forward a set of recommendations for incorporating social media tools in crisis communication. Among these recommendations are to use social media tools for environmental scanning in order to listen to public’s concern, as well as to follow public opinion changes.

In separate study, Yang and Yang (2011) suggests civil service and governmental public service institutions to capitalize the cyber communication in dealing with media relations and crisis management. However, they admit that improving the overall quality of communication is also a necessary requirement.

Schultz, Utz, and Göritz, (2011) indicate crisis communication via twitter led to less negative crisis reactions than blogs and newspaper articles. They also found that the medium matters more than the message. In contrast, Nilsson et al. (2012) claim message style is important. Their study supports Mersham (2010) that official messages need to be specific, consistent, clear and accurate and also include explicit conclusions about subject matter

As for Earle et al. (2010), Wei et al. (2010) and Landau (2011), the message does not only need to be comprehensible and accurate but timely. It is undeniable that the timing of a message is crucial because an appropriate release time can lead to effective transmission of crisis information.

Yuan et al. (2011) however recommend to make the real information available to the public at the earliest time, aside from building an honest moral image which requires certain strategy to employ. Research by Coombs and Holladay (2009) indicates the strategy of information resulted in less negative crisis reactions than the strategies of apology or sympathy. Apart from that, Feldman et al. (2015) reveal public official usually employ the art of equivocation and even evasive language, as a strategy for turning difficult situations to their own advantage during crisis.

Apart from that, Botterell and Griss (2011) state that citizen preparedness in terms of communication, coordination, collaboration, teamwork, motivation and commitment are part of the challenges that need to be considered in managing disaster either before, during or after crisis. In managing the crisis, challenges and any opportunities should be identified by the disaster administration community. In responding to this, the current study is conducted as a post-crisis assessment on MH370 PCs particularly the challenges faced by Malaysia and its representatives or spokespeople during the event.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The overall objective of the research is to learn from the experiences of the past for improvements in the future. In order to achieve the objective, the research attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by Malaysia and its spokespeople in handling media during MH370 Airlines accident?
2. How the challenges faced by Malaysia and its spokespeople emerge during the MH370 Airlines accident?
3. How to overcome the challenges emerged during the MH370 Airlines accident?

### **Design and Methodology**

A qualitative approach was engaged in this study as the approach generally paves the way for explaining and understanding meaning of social practice (Merriam, 1998), and the researcher is the main instrument for collecting and analyzing data. This study is regarded as basic qualitative descriptive research as the analysis of the data will involve construction of meaning through the researcher's interpretation (Merriam 2009). The data of this study is based from 6 informants consist of 3 media practitioner, 2 military officers and 1 crisis communication expert. In qualitative studies, it is common that data are based on 1 to 30 informants (Fridlund & Hildingh, 2000). However, the sample size should be determined on the basis of informational needs so that the research question can be answered with sufficient confidence (Krippendorff, 2004; Patton, 2002). Using content analysis, the data gathered from interview and focus group discussion were categorized according to the term identified. Content analysis enable researcher to elicit meaning from the data collected and to draw realistic conclusions from it (Bengtsson, 2016).

The scope of this study embraces the challenges faced by the government and its spokesperson in handling media as indicated by the informants in their response to interviews and focus group discussion.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings are where all the result of the data analysed can be concluded. The findings of this study are described and discussed as below:

#### **Challenges of Managing Media**

As per 30<sup>th</sup> July 2018, the disappearance of MH370 Malaysia airlines remains a mystery. The nature of the crisis that can be considered as a “black swan” event (an exceptionally unprecedented occasion) puts Malaysia in the face of uncertainty. Due to that, the government and its spokesperson experienced several challenges dealing with media. Among the challenges are the challenge in managing media control centre and handling PCs.

#### **Challenges in Managing Media Control Centre**

The challenge in managing media includes the intricacy to indicate the location of media control centre and its media officers. The fact that the crisis of MH370 Malaysia airlines is a missing plane where its location is yet to be indicated, confusion happen in determining the leading authority who is responsible to arrange for Central Disaster Management and Relief Committee (JPBBP), including management at the scene of disaster, for example to place Media Control Centre where the PCs should be held. It is because, referring to National Security Council Directive No. 20 Policy and Mechanism of National Disaster Management and Relief (1997), the determination of arrangements is based on location and level of disaster. It is stated that:

“A media control centre should be formed at the sight of incident and installed in Green Zone. It is a place where media officers and staffs can perform their duty in connection with the disaster coverage. The facility at this centre, such as media conference space, briefing space, radio, television and communication facilities or equipment also should be prepared. Information Department at disaster management level is responsible to set up and control the centre...” (p.18).

In relation to that, since the whereabouts of the disaster and its level was remained unknown, a media control centre that should be formed at the sight of accident was decided to be located in Sama Sama Hotel, Kuala Lumpur. A respective zone for media officers and staffs to perform their duty in connection with the disaster coverage was not distinctly installed for the first few days of PCs. According to one of the informants of this study who is a media practitioner, the facility at this centre such as media conference space, briefing space and communication equipment were also seemed not to be in proper presentation. The lacking of systematic and organized arrangement for such unprepared event is burdensome for the media officers and other related staff to perform their jobs at site. Furthermore, this deficiency could ultimately put the disaster management at risk.

The weakness in managing media can be reflected from the first four PCs. Nevertheless, the situation improved after Datuk Seri Hishamuddin Tun Hussein take over the event. It was stated in Sunday Star, dated 13 April 2014 that “...there were ‘huge winds of change’ in the way he handled the media. He wasn’t arrogant, didn’t make uncalled for remarks and he was trying to

see himself as the family of the passengers and crew...” Despite of the credit he received, the government spokesperson had to confront plenty of challenges in handling PCs.

### **Challenges in Handling PCs**

“The PCs is an opportunity to put cross key messages, emphasizing the human interest and acknowledging the shared misery” (Kirkham & Muthaly, 2015). Despite of the benefits can be derived from the event, there are challenges to be encountered. The challenges in handling PCs involve struggles to coordinate information, deal with journalist and chase speculations.

### **Coordinating Information**

Coordinating information is crucial to ensure conformity and consistency in giving response to the media. However, in the extreme setting such M370 PC, achieving integration was taxing since fast-response is demanded. It can be seen in the earlier series of PCs where delegating tasks and demarcating expertise were practiced to deal with ambiguity. Besides Director General of Department of Civil Aviation (DCA henceforth) and Chief Executive Officer of Malaysian Airlines System Berhad (MAS henceforth), Deputy Director General (Operation) of Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency, Director General of Immigration Malaysia, Home Ministry Secretary-General, as well as Inspector-General of Police were invited to talk and answer questions from journalists. They were expected to speak in unison and in tandem with each other. This practise however led to inappropriate information delivered since the representative were not well-trained for crisis communication. This allowed media to fill the void with speculation. Journalists played their role to ask speculative questions to get speculative answers for their particular reasons. As a result, consistency in delivering information seemed hard to achieve.

Other than that, certain aspect of information delivery seemed not to be considered wisely. Thoughtful provision should be given beforehand when stating the cause of anything or predicting the future. Failure to do so will result in propensity for giving misleading statements as countering misreporting is not an easy job. The case of two passengers who boarded on stolen passports is a typical example to explain this issue. During MH370 PC on 10th March 2014, Director General of DCA had clearly mentioned that “we satisfied whatever gone through the protocol at the airport” in his closing response to the numbers of questions by journalist regarding to the issue. However, few days later, a statement given by former Malaysian Home Minister contradicted the response. He said that Interpol’s database of lost passport records that ‘too large’ would be too much for Malaysia’s database management system and thus may slow down the process of immigration checks at counters. The failure to consult database system was badly criticised since air safety and security was supposed to be tightened following the 9/11 hijacks. It had been attacked by Interpol saying that “Malaysia’s decision to not consult the database before allowing travellers to enter the country or board planes ‘cannot be defended by falsely blaming technology or Interpol’. If there is any responsibility or blame for this failure, it rests solely with Malaysia’s Immigration Department...” (9<sup>th</sup> March 2014, Agence France-Presse).

Thus, to avoid this setback to recur, a complete understanding of coordinating process in fast-response settings should be possessed by those who directly or indirectly involve in crisis management.

### **Preserve Security Matters**

Apart from difficulty to coordinate information, spokesperson faced with some questions that forbidden on legal or national security grounds from answering. MH370 Malaysian Airlines accident involves some missions that require resources, equipment, skills and man power from

many agencies with an effective coordination for certain period of time. Along the process, for instance in gathering information from satellite surveillance and doing analysis of surveillance radar data, the collaboration from other countries is needed since Malaysian military radar fail to detect the missing plane. This collaboration however could enable other sovereignties for intrusion.

In other respects,, some risky information also needs to be concealed when the issue related is under investigation. Even though Datuk Seri Hishamuddin had stated on record that Malaysia put aside national security interest by disclosing its military radar data for the sake of search and rescue mission, there are commentators argued that the government and minister were trying to hide crucial information. It is because, the fact that aircraft investigation carried out by DCA, (or now known as the Civil Aviation Authority of Malaysia, CAAM) was not for the public disclosure is not understood by public. The investigation was meant for MAS's post-mortem and limited to the area of their interests only. International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO henceforth) is a body that fully responsible for the entire aircraft investigation. Pending investigation on MH370 flight accident by the organisation hindered the spokesperson to discuss the issue pertaining to the subject under their investigation. The investigation entailed verification and coordination process that consumed long time involving many parties and bodies.

Some questions from journalist have to be avoided by Datuk Seri Hishamuddin when the sequence of answer responding to the journalist actually the turning point would be the release of very sensitive data to the Malaysian military and ICAO. It can be noted in several PCs that he highlighted "we have put the interest of the passengers and the plane above national security and national interest". It is also quite often he responded to the journalist that "we cannot reveal everything and if I answer that question I will also be speculating". It can be seen that he tried his best to be diplomatic in his answers when responding to vulnerabilities.

### **Save Reputation**

Other than national sovereignty, national reputation is worthy of protection. Stan Silverman, an advisor and writer on leadership, entrepreneurship and corporate governance claims that people do not want to work for or deal with leaders or companies whose reputations are tarnished or who are not ethical. As a representative of MAS and Malaysia, spokesperson is responsible to protect national reputation at all means since what is being communicated during the PCs can have an impact on the future legitimacy and reputation of institution represented and Malaysia as a whole. It is inevitable for spokesperson to receive judgement from media and audience. People also make judgment about the causes of events, and the organisation involved. As a consequence, their image and national reputation would be threatened or lost.

Several scholars (e.g. Gotsi & Wilson 2002; Bromley, 1993; Trevino et. al, 2000; Marekuliasz, as cited in Silverman, 2017, p.1) note that reputation depends on a person's values and ethics on doing the right thing. Doing the right things is so subjective for spokesperson to comply with. In the context of MH370 PCs, it is dependent on journalists and audience's perception that influenced by his or her personal feelings, tastes or opinions. It is not an easy task for the spokesperson to act with the most propriety to adjust to different global media outlets and their ways. During the question and answer session for instance, western journalist can be seen aggravative while journalists from China seemed to be very pushy and overbearing. The examples are as follow:

Example 1: 12/3/2014 (Tuesday) at 5.30pm

Journalist X: Excuse me, this is NBC News. You are getting increasing criticism now, you searching east you searching west, you don't seem to know what you saying on radar as you taking told now why they placed that. This is confusion now.

Example 2: 31/3/2014 (Monday) at 5.30pm

Journalist Y: Good afternoon Datuk Seri, I have two questions, I'm Y from Chinese Daily, you mention just now there will be as specific briefing to the Chinese families ... how about the relatives from the aircraft countries will be conducted another briefing or will be join briefing and at the mean time will be no specific briefing in Beijing. The second question is the families' members in PC yesterday at Subang demanding apologies from Malaysia Company and your respond? Thanks.

The spokesperson needs to appear to be firm in the exercise of his authority aside from adopting facework strategies - communicative strategies to maintain or restore their own or others image. Spokesperson should be highly trained of crisis communication skill, together with facework strategies in order to manage media that involves high-stakes communication.

**Overcoming the Challenges in Handling Media**

A key point to overcome the challenges faced in this crisis is 'be prepared'. Amongst the important input that can be derived from the interview session with informant of this study who was a crisis management advisor and consultant are; only certain important items should be released to the public through mass media in order to avoid any confusion during disaster. Besides, only the chairman of Management and Relief Disaster, operation commander or an officer authorized by the chairman of Management and Relief Disaster is allowed to issue any statements to the press if necessary. A well-planned PCs ought to adhere to that.

Apart from that, having insufficient training before the crisis, as well as insufficient time for spokespeople to rehearse before the MH370 PCs can contribute frailty in their speech. According to her, MH370 PCs had been criticized due to the team's unpreparedness of what to say and how to say during the question and answer session.

In relation to that, McLean (2014) asserts that unpreparedness creates a 'crisis smog', a situation where the person in charge are blinded by pressure they have never previously experienced. He claimed that organisations often fail to cope with it as a result of a lack of information, a lack of time and a lack of resources. Nevertheless, what experienced by MAS (Malaysian Airlines System) and Malaysia government was more than that, they were actually uncertain of what happened to the plane. With such uncertainty, communication model used by New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in the days following 9/11 could be adopted (McLean, 2014). By adopting the model, MAS and Malaysia should make clear what they know, what they don't know, what they

are doing and what media can do. It is believed that transparency and trust can be built and doubts of something that might be hidden can be removed.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the information gathered from the interviewees in this study presents greater understanding about the challenges of managing media during MH370 Malaysian Airlines accident. The information would benefit spokespeople, countrymen, mediators and diplomats to reflect the challenges in improving the effectiveness of crisis communication. It is also hoped that the information helps to reduce the outrage felt by family members of the victims on board and enable audiences to make sense of what happened.

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