MH370 All lives lost: the ‘Black Swan’ Disaster Confirmed with a 26 Word Txt

Gwyneth V.J. Howell, University of Western Sydney

Abstract

Today social media has transformed how individuals communicate with each other and also how people now discover and share information. Social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are powerful, influential, and revolutionary model for exposing and diffusing public opinion. For crisis communication practitioners to act effectively on behalf of organisations, they must monitor and track both traditional and new media sources for potential issues, and respond to accordingly. However, when confronted by a 'Black Swan' event such as the loss of MH370, communication practitioners are challenged by not only the event but the new media ecosystem in which they now operate.

Keywords: social media, crisis communication, Black Swan event
Introduction

In 2014, online and social media underpin the media communication process, providing channels to access information for the global audience. This digital revolution presents new communication challenge. Social media refers to the use of web-based and mobile technologies that turn communication into an interactive dialogue. Kietzmann et al. (2011) suggest that “social media introduce substantial and pervasive changes to communication between organizations, communities, and individuals” (p. 250). Further, Internet-based applications that enable people to communicate and share resources, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, chat rooms (Lindsay, 2011) are driving media consumption. These social networking sites have altered the way people communicate, interact and respond, in particular reference to personal and professional relationships (Rapp, 2010). The transition to Web 3.0 technologies presents many undefined challenges for crisis communication practitioners. The evolution from inter-personal communications to communications facilitated by digital technologies (Meuter, Ostrom, Roundtree, and Bitner, 2000) presents practitioners with the greatest challenge when responding to crises events.

The most recent crisis communication literature acknowledges that the Web has been adopted as a worldwide network of information resources and a powerful communication tool (Fearm-Banks, 2011; Harlow & Harlow, 2013). Further, research asserts that that during crisis situations Web sites enable organisations to communicate with the media and stakeholders in a more efficient and effective manner (Coombs, 2012). Yet in 2014, the new communication ecosystem is not static. While company and emergency Web sites are an important aspect of the communication touch points for individuals; today Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, You Tube, Blogs, Wikipedia as well as instant messaging platforms such as Snapchat augment the already cluttered message and information landscape.

The world’s most prominent Social Networking Site, Facebook conducted its first annual global media census in 2013 to reveal Facebook had 1.16 billion monthly active users, with 86 percent of its users outside the US. Facebook reportedly has 95 million users in China (despite the fact that it is officially blocked), 68 million in India and 42 million in Brazil (Smith, 2013). China’s giant social media network, Qzone, has 712 million users. Despite being blocked, Google+ has an estimated 100 million users in China; Twitter has 80 million; YouTube 60 million users; LinkedIn; the only major social network that is not blocked in China, has over 20 million users. Further, nearly 25 percent of LinkedIn’s users are in India. Real growth is in the Asia-Pacific region, where for example, 82 per cent of Thai smartphone owners access social media daily on their phones (Smith, 2013). YouTube continued to attract 1 billion monthly active users (MAUs) during 2013, while the top three messaging platforms in 2013 were: WhatsApp, LiNE, and WeChat. The reach and impact of these channels now effect all communication, the heighten thirst for news has increased the intensity for communication practitioners to respond swiftly in crisis situations.
In crisis communication literature, basic principles exist to assist communication practitioners in successfully communicating before, during and following a crisis. Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (2008) assert that, although the fundamentals of crisis management remain steadfast, “the tools to apply them need to be revised and adapted to today’s digital environment” (p.151). How individuals use and interact during crises can now be monitored measuring social media usage.

Communication is a multi-faceted practice that facilitates mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and audiences. Crises are unpredictable events that can impact an organisation’s viability, credibility and damage and often destroy the organisation’s reputation. The size of the organisation is irrelevant, crises can and will happen (Coombs, 2011; Mitroff, 2005). Recent research indicates that even though 27 per cent of organisations will fail to exist after the onslaught of a crisis, the majority remain unprepared (Fearn-Banks, 2013; Howell, Miller, Rushmore-House, 2014). Crisis management is now an increasingly important aspect of communication practice. As Regester and Larkin (2008) observe organisations should not question whether a crisis will occur, “it is only a matter of when, which type and how” (p.163). When a crisis does occur, the organisation must respond expeditiously using transparent and honest communication. Scholarship and practice-based research have defined the framework for crisis management theory. In crisis communication literature, basic principles exist to assist practitioners in successfully communicating before, during and following a crisis. Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith (2008) assert that, although the fundamentals of crisis management remain steadfast, “the tools to apply them need to be revised and adapted to today’s digital environment” (p.151). Further, Jordan-Meier (2011) suggest that a “crisis plan is incomplete without a comprehensive digital strategy” (p.2). The Web and social media augment the current habitual challenges crisis managers face. While guidelines have been established for crisis responses using these tools, as demonstrated with the MH370 disaster, simply following static crisis response guidelines in this ever changing communication ecosystem does not guarantee strong outcomes for the organisation.

**Black Swan event**

Events such as 9/11, Super Storm Sandy and the loss of MH370 are almost impossible to prepare for. Taleb (2010) identifies a ‘Black Swan event’ as a highly improbable occurrence with three characteristics: that it is impossible to predict, it carries a massive impact and its shock value is stunning because people could never conceive of such an event occurring. However, drawing on Taleb 2010’s analysis not all Black Swans are crises (e.g. winning a lottery is a positive Black Swan). Further, not all crises are Black Swans. The difference between an earthquake and the massive earthquake that struck Japan on Friday March 11, 2011 triggering a tsunami; inundating vast
areas of the country's eastern seaboard and causing major damage to the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, is a good example of a disaster and a Black Swan Event. Typically, earthquakes occur relatively frequently in and near Japan, so organisations well prepared having disaster plans in place to guide response. Typically operations can usually be restored to normal after a period of reconstruction. However, the Triple Disaster Event in Japan in 2011 was more than a crisis – it was a Black Swan. The size and scope of the damage had never been envisioned, organisations were shocked by the overwhelming impact of the three stages of the disaster, and for many, the post-11/11 Japan bears little resemblance to the past. The new ‘normal’ in Japan is heightened awareness and fear particularly of nuclear disasters, and none of the nuclear reactors in Japan have been operational since this event. A Black Swan event (or situation, if it's a culmination of circumstances that have evolved over time) through the experience change the individuals impacted by it. While airlines can and do prepare for fatal accidents, the case selected illustrates the new challenges in terms of social and online media while addressing a ‘Black Swan’ event.

**Crisis response protocols/strategies**

Aviation accidents typically attract overwhelming public interest, particularly if they involve loss of life. All airlines operate with a raft of crisis management strategies, responses and policies produced into one document digital or otherwise – outlining the organisation's reaction response to crisis events. Further due to the global thirst for news and social media channels, such events can be circulated and commented on before the airline, possibly the manufacturer, airport, and air navigation service provider are fully aware of the event.

In January 2009 US Airways flight 1549 crashed into the Hudson river in New York City, the first tweet was from ferry boat captain Janis Krums “There’s a plane in the Hudson, I'm on the ferry going to pick up the people. Crazy.” (Beaumont, 2009, ¶ 14). The unfolding drama was documented via social media as 155 passengers and crew made their way to safety using the aircraft's inflatable emergency chutes. It took mainstream media, 15 minutes before live coverage was online and aired via traditional media channels. WNBC had televised an interview with Krums before the company had issued a media release or updated its website (Hannah, 2009). Just after an hour the company released the following statement via its web site “US Airways will continue to release information as it becomes available. Please monitor usairways.com for the latest information.” (US Airways, 2009). Online flight information services such as FlightStats reported that the downed flight as 26 minutes late, but still 'en route' to its destination of Charlotte in North Carolina for an hour after it crashed. The social media response by the company was stilted. The company did not even have a Twitter account so it was 4 hours before an account was
created and its first tweet appeared. Yet, in less than two hours a Wikipedia page had been created, complete with over 170 edits or additions about the disaster (Hannah, 2009).

In 2012, the International Air Transport Association issued guidelines on crisis communication protocols to assist “the communications departments of airlines, airports and manufacturers in dealing with the news media after an aviation accident in the age of social media” (IATA, 2012, ¶2). These guidelines are based on the raft of crisis communication literature available. Many of the key aspects of these draw on leading crisis academics including and have in part used to inform the development of the crisis communication strategy and protocols Malaysian Airlines employed during the March 2014 disaster.

MH370 – bound for Beijing, China

On March 7, 2014, MH370 a Boeing 777 aircraft departed its home base of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia for an overnight flight bound for Beijing, China. The aircraft was carrying 227 passengers (including two babies) and 12 crew. The last known contact with the pilots was at 1:06am when the final voice transmission from the cockpit of Flight 370 was “All right, good night.”. Air Traffic Control lost contact with the plane at 1:22am and contacted Malaysia Airlines at 2:40am on the morning of March 8, 2014 to alert the airline to missing aircraft.

First response Saturday March 8, 2014 Malaysia Airlines issued the following statement:

Saturday, March 08, 07:30 AM MYT +0800 Media Statement – MH370 Incident released at 7.24am Sepang, 8 March 2014:

Malaysia Airlines confirms that flight MH370 has lost contact with Subang Air Traffic Control at 2.40am, today (8 March 2014). Flight MH370, operated on the B777-200 aircraft, departed Kuala Lumpur at 12.41am on 8 March 2014. MH370 was expected to land in Beijing at 6.30am the same day. The flight was carrying a total number of 227 passengers (including 2 infants), 12 crew members.

Malaysia Airlines is currently working with the authorities who have activated their Search and Rescue team to locate the aircraft. The airline will provide regular updates on the situation. Meanwhile, the families may contact +603 7884 1234 for further info.'

Malaysian Airlines provided published emergency contact information for Malaysia and Beijing residents, the written media statements, the company’s media contacts and passenger manifest. On board were passengers from 13 different nations: China and Taiwan (154), Malaysia (38), Indonesia (12),
MH370 All lives lost: the ‘Black Swan’ Disaster Confirmed with a 26 Word Txt

Australia (7), France (3), United States (4), New Zealand (2), Ukraine (2), Canada (2), Russia (1), Italy (1), Netherlands (1), Austria (1). The varying nationalities and the large number of Chinese missing added to the complexity of the situation due to the differences in cultural and political opinions in the region.

The IATA recommends that the first principles of response are: be proactive; establish yourself (the company) as the best information source; be honest; express regret and importantly understand your audience (IATA, 2012). The IATA also recommends a web site for the emergency or “dark site” should be branded very simply, without any of the colourful logos or images which normally appear on the home page. The IATA suggests that this page should display the latest statement on the situation and all statements should be archived and available via a link but also display a link to the “normal” home page, to ensure that customers are still able to use the site for online bookings (IATA, 2012).

Second response Saturday March 8, 2014 Malaysia Airlines issued the following statement:

Saturday, March 08, 02:30 PM MYT +0800 Malaysia Airlines MH370 Flight Incident update as 2.30pm

We regret to announce that Subang Traffic Control lost contact with flight MH370 at 2:40 am today.

We are currently working with international authorities on the search and rescue mission and as at 1400 hours, 08 March 2014, we have no information on the location of the aircraft.

MH370 is a Boeing 777-200 aircraft on a code share with China Southern Airlines. It departed Kuala Lumpur at 12.41 am today for Beijing. The aircraft was scheduled to land at Beijing International Airport at 6.30am local Beijing time. The flight had a total number of 227 passengers and 12 crew members. The passengers were from 14 different countries, most of whom are from China.

Our team is currently calling family members of passengers to keep them updated on the situation and our focus now is to work with the emergency responders and the authorities. We are sending a MH team to support the families of passengers at Beijing. The airline will continue to publish regular updates on the situation.

Our thoughts and prayers are with all passengers, our crew and their family members.

(Malaysia Airlines, 2014c)

A ‘dark site’ for such events and has been a standard crisis communication tool and introduced by the Coombs (2007) which demonstrated the value of a
MH370 All lives lost: the ‘Black Swan’ Disaster Confirmed
with a 26 Word Tx

A crisis web site designed to assist people during crises and disasters. This stems from various organisational experiences post 9/11 with the use of intranet sites to contact employees during the disaster. Coombs (2012) recommends that dark site is only activated when a crisis or emergency occurs. Further, Fearn-Banks (2013) recommends that communication practitioners draft mess that will be used during a crisis, often employing templates for the possible statements by CEO, media releases, and dark web sites. Coombs (2012) and Business Roundtable (2002) recommend that the Legal Officer pre-approve the use of the messages to ensure a timely response.

Drawing from the experiences and outcomes of the BP Gulf of Mexico disaster, by midday on the first day of the disaster Malaysia Airlines went ‘dark’ as all promotional activities on its website, Facebook, Twitter, and Google + accounts. Each site was replaced with a colourless background to reflect the mood and seriousness of the situation. The company however did not purchase the Google search terms, thereby losing influence in terms of the ease of direction of information searches on the web.

Figure 1: Twitter Message Example on Day 3 of Disaster

(Malaysia Airlines, 2014b)

In issuing the statement at 7:30am Malaysian Airlines demonstrated responsibility and sought to establish the organisation as the official source of information. The company used it Twitter account to demonstrate care and regret during the initial days of the search (see Figure 1). This demonstrates the changes in airline response to social media tools and has evolved since the 2012 IATA guidelines were released. The staging of the Media conference, the decision to activate the dark site and the well-crafted social media messages suggest that the airline’s communications team was well organised, trained and prepared to manage the event.

There were several initial actions that would taint the airline’s initial effectiveness of its response strategy. Malaysian Airlines elected to hold the media conference after the plane was due to land to announce the plane was...
MH370 All lives lost: the ‘Black Swan’ Disaster Confirmed with a 26 Word Txt

missing. The airline’s explanation of the delay was due to personally informing to relatives is at odds with what occurred. Prior to the media conference, the flight details were removed from the Beijing Arrivals Board with no explanation, causing confusion and fear in those waiting for their relatives in the Arrival Hall. Vision of the distraught relatives in Beijing was televised, simultaneously on various news channels during the media conference staged in Kuala Lumpa. More than 500 relatives in Beijing were directed to a hall to be informed about the missing plane, this briefing undertaken by a junior Malaysian Airways staff member did not allay fears and concerns. Further, while the airline sought to confirm as many facts as possible before calling the conference, this delay illustrates a plan based on the traditional crisis communication strategy which is applicable or persuasive in the new media ecosystem of social media and digital news.

Corrective response in the mire of misinformation, gossip, rumour and innuendo

Organisations concerned with the management of their reputation must monitor and track traditional and an increasing number of new media sources, and to be prepared to engage with a broader range of stakeholders than previously. The Arab Spring uprisings and an increasing number of social media-led individual rebellions against companies (e.g. Vodafail in Australia,) are evidence that individuals can provoke public outcry and change (cf. Dobscha, 1989). Communication practitioners have responded by using social media platforms “to gauge the sentiments of their stakeholders, prevent crises, or cope with crises” (Fearn Banks, 2011, p.55). Stakeholders and the traditional media are now able to use official and unofficial sources to gather information on the organization, its brands and its spokespeople (Wigley & Fontenot, 2010). This means that in the absence of sufficient and credible “news” from an organisation in crisis, it has never been easier for social and traditional media to fulfil that information void (Howell & Miller, 2006).

As the international interest and coverage intensified as failure to locate the aircraft continued Malaysia Airline responded to false reports and speculation as rumour intensified. A range of experts were interviewed to provide opinions and speculate on the plane’s fate. Speculation and reporting included: passengers who checked in but did not board to the pilot’s political affiliations, fake passports and potential terrorist plots. In the first week of the disaster 20 media statements include some form of denial or clarification by the airline. For example:

Tuesday, March 11, 05:29 PM MYT +0800 Malaysia Airlines MH370 Flight Incident –

12th Media Statement This statement is in reference to the many queries on the
alleged five (5) passengers who checked-in but did not board MH370 on 8 March 2014 from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing despite having valid tickets to travel.

Malaysia Airlines wishes to clarify that there were four (4) passengers who had valid booking to travel on flight MH370, 8 March 2014, but did not show up to check-in for the flight.

As such, the issue of off-loading unaccompanied baggage did not arise, as the said four passengers did not check in for the flight. Hence, the above claim is untrue.’

(Malaysia Airlines, 2014c)

While errors and miscommunication began to arise and the situation worsened, as Hishammuddin Hussein, the Malaysian defence minister and Ahmad Jauhari Yahya, chief executive of Malaysia Airlines, contradicting each other in public. The Defence Minister abruptly changing his story from the day before. Geoffrey Thomas, editor-in-chief of AirlineRatings.com, suggests that the lack of international experience among Malaysia Airlines’ public relations was a problem. “Their PR department has been missing in action. It’s when something like this happens you really need them,” he said. (Alexander, 2014 ¶ 20).

After more than a week searching on the original flight path for the aircraft, it was announced on March 15, that analysis of pings transmitted from the plane to an Inmarsat satellite indicated that the aircraft flew for additional eight hours, following to possible arcs, one above through Central Asia and the other which cut across the Indian Ocean. Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced that the satellite imagery of debris southwest of Perth presented “new and credible information” about the fate of the plane. By working backward from the wreckage’s location using known drift patterns, searchers would be able to lay out a grid on the seabed in which to trawl with listening devices for the acoustic sounder or ‘pinger’. However, time for recovery of the vital Black Box, closed on XXX. In 2009 Air France flight 447, crashed in the South Atlantic, with all lives lost. While wreckage, in that event was found within 24 hours of the crash, it took officials two years to retrieve the flight’s black boxes from the ocean floor. More than 29 planes, 18 ships and six helicopters have been involved in the painstaking search of 600,000 square-kilometres of ocean looking for wreckage of ML370.

It was then clarified that further analysis had proven that the plane must be in the southern arc, and that there was therefore no hope that anyone aboard had survived. So on March 25, 2014 as the media conference occurred Malaysian Airlines notified the relatives of victims by SMS message. Malaysia Airlines assert that “it is in that spirit that we informed the majority of the families in advance of the Prime Minister’s statement in person and by telephone. SMSs were used only as an additional means of communicating with the families” (Malaysia Airlines, 2014d). The majority of victims not residing in Malaysia refute this assertion. “I didn’t handle it. Just sickened, sickened that someone
would actually send me a text message to say that my loved one was dead,” says Dania Weeks whose husband was on the ill fated flight (Lu, 2014, ¶ 14)

This disaster is very complex and illustrates all the factors suggested by Taleb (2010), hence a Black Swan Event. The intent by Malaysia Airlines to undertake an effective and efficient international response to the search appears to have overtaken and overwhelmed the human side of the story. With any disaster or crisis, Fearn-Banks (2013) and Howell et al (2014) suggest that there must be a careful balance between the desire to release timely information to families as quickly as possible with a level of care and sensitivity. “In this case Malaysia Airlines appears to have got that balance wrong.” (Beech cited in Macleod, 2014, ¶ 4)

Figure 2: Text Message sent to Families of the victims of MF370

(Zara, 2014)
MH370 All lives lost: the ‘Black Swan’ Disaster Confirmed with a 26 Word Txt

Tuesday, April 01, 05:45 PM MYT +0800 Malaysia Airlines MH370 flight incident - press briefing by Hishammuddin Hussein, Minister of Defence and Acting Minister of Transport

1. Briefing for families

Tomorrow a closed-door briefing meeting for the families will be held in Kuala Lumpur.

The Department of Civil Aviation and Malaysia Airlines will lead the briefing, which will be moderated by the Prime Minister's Special Envoy to China. Technical experts from Malaysia, China and Australia will participate in the briefing, and the Chinese Ambassador to Malaysia will attend.

2. Transcript

Today we are releasing the full transcript of communications between flight MH370 and Air Traffic Control Kuala Lumpur. The transcript has been shared with the families, and is attached as an Annex to this press release (click here for the transcript). There is no indication of anything abnormal in the transcript.

The transcript was initially held as part of the police investigation. Previously, Malaysia Airlines had stated initial investigations indicated that the voice which signed off was that of the co-pilot. The police are working to confirm this belief, and forensic examination of the actual recording is on-going.

The international investigations team and the Malaysian authorities remain of the opinion that, up until the point at which it left military primary radar coverage, MH370's movements were consistent with deliberate action by someone on the plane.

(Malaysia Airlines, 2014e)

Until April 1, 2014 Malaysian authorities maintained that last message from the airplane cockpit was, ‘All right, good night.’ However, Malaysia’s Transport Ministry corrected the statement asserting that final voice transmission from the cockpit of Flight 370 was actually ‘Good night Malaysian three seven zero.’ While some suggest this further contradiction during the search for the missing plane raises questions about how Malaysian officials have handled the investigation. The airline has proactively addresses all the rumours and comments in the media during the disaster.

The MH370 disaster and resulting world attention has put Malaysia’s long-ruling government where its mainstream press is sanctioned and controlled in the unaccustomed position of having to answer at times difficult questions from reporters.

Adding a further level of difficulty in managing this issue from a
communications perspective is that Malaysian Airlines is not in control of the search operation, is being undertaken by the Malaysian government. Transport and Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein said on his Twitter feed the country’s attorney general had been instructed to ‘compile evidence and advise’ on possible legal action. Hishammuddin was also quoted by the Malay Mail newspaper as saying: “We have been compiling all the false reports since day one. When the time is right, the government should sue them.”

No resolution – the Black Swan

The overarching factor in this disaster, the 2014 Black Swan of the International Aviation industry is that overall Malaysia Airlines and Malaysia government have presented as a mostly united front, at times overwhelmed with grief and ‘the unknown. Until some wreckage is found there are more questions than answers.

Public opinion regarding the organisation directly affected the impact of coverage (Barton 1993). While existing public opinion towards both Malyasian Airlines and the extensive international effort to find the plane has increased bias in media, Malyasian Airlines has not sought to manage these attitudes (Douglas & Wildervsky, 1982; Nelkin, 1987). Dutton and Duncan (1987) assert that the public’s attention to an issue tends to affect organisation response to the issue or crisis. This holds true for Malyasiain Airlines.

In crisis communication, diligence is an essential aspect of the role, and regardless of the preparation, communications strategies will only be successful if all avenues are explored and public relations practitioners are prepared for the unexpected (Fearn-Banks, 2011). Public relations professionals face the same issues and as a result the communication challenges are similar as the principles of the strategies in normal business operations (Mitroff, 1996). The most important issue faced by communication practitioners professionals in dealing with a crisis is maintaining control of the message, and today in the new media ecosystem this is very difficult indeed.

However, it appears in terms of MH370 the key to addressing a ‘Black Swan’ event is not just mounting an effective response; it is mounting that response while simultaneously dealing with the psychological impact of being shocked by an inconceivable event of unimaginable proportions. Understanding the influence of survivor psychology provides great insight into why some organisations fail and others survive, or perhaps even thrive, in a Black Swan event.

References

Alexander, H. (March 17, 2014). In Malaysia Airlines MH370 aftermath officials provided masterclass in crisis mismanagement, National Post, accessed March 31, 2014 from
MH370 All lives lost: the ‘Black Swan’ Disaster Confirmed with a 26 Word Txt


