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THE RUSSIAN CRISIS COMMUNICATION RESPONSE BEYOND MH17 TRAGEDY

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Abstract

Effective crisis communication response through using the proper strategies is critical to cope with crises and to protect the reputation and existence of the involved parties. Usually, aviation accidents receive great attention from the media and the public. Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) which was shot down over eastern Ukraine on 17 July 2014 during its scheduled flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur received global attention. This attention was due to the involvement of several countries either at the level of the countries of victims or the countries accused of the attack. Image repair theory proposed by William Benoit, the widely used in crisis communication response was implemented in this study. The Russian response to the international accusation, especially from the Western world on supporting the attackers of MH17 has been examined in this study. This study implemented both quantitative and qualitative content analysis to achieve its aims. A total of 306 news stories from the online *New Straits Times* newspaper Website from the years 2014 to 2019 were analysed. A total of 191 strategies were included in 123 news stories since some stories combined more than a strategy. Out of 191 strategies, 43.5% were simple denial, followed by shift the blame and attack accuser with 35.1% and 21.5% respectively. The results revealed that the image repair effort by Russia was effective and successful.

Keywords: Crisis communication, image repair, MH17, response strategies, Russia

1. Introduction

On 17 July 2014 a total of 298 people including 283 and 15 crew members were killed after taking down the Malaysia Airlines flight 17 (MH17) over eastern Ukraine. Those victims were from several nationalities. The flight was scheduled flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur when it was shot down. This incident occurred although the International Civil Aviation Organisation declared this usual flight route as safe (Ministry of Transport Malaysia, 2014).

Airline accidents entail human tragedy and they attract a large amount of scrutiny and attention from public and media regardless of the number of losses. The occurrence of aviation serious incidents is extremely rare but they are still happening, and managing and planning challenges of an influential response have never been more complicated. The accelerating changes to the political, business, media, and social environment led to more expectations and pressures (International Air Transport Association, 2016).

Airline accidents are large-scale events that receive huge media coverage, get the attention of government and industry, and involve several stakeholders. Those crashes are distinguished by threat, surprise, uncertainty, extreme emotions, and time pressures. Those accidents reflect the high level of vulnerability in the industry to the crisis and take the complexities of crisis communication and management (Ray, 1999). Crises are negative, sudden and unexpected situations or incidents (Oliver, 2004; Ruff & Aziz, 2003). They come in different forms and affect the people all over the world, and when they suddenly occur they create an acute threat that needs an immediate response (Malone & Coombs, 2009).

 Crisis management is the total of activities aimed to reduce the influence of a crisis (Boin et al., 2013). It is taking control and seizing the initiative of what has occurred before it engulfs the organisation (Regester & Larkin, 2008). Additionally, crisis communication is the messaging act during and after a crisis situation (Harrison, 2005). The aim of crisis communication is providing particular harm-reducing information, explaining particular event, identifying possible outcomes and results to the influenced communities in complete, candid, accurate, honest, and prompt manner (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005).

Communication occurs at all stages and levels of crisis. Excellent crisis communication allows avoiding a crisis, learning more from a crisis, accelerating the recovery of an organisation, and ending a crisis quickly (Lee et al., 2011). The lack of sufficient, fluent, timely, and true information during a crisis strongly influences the trust of the people which endanger their commitment and cooperation towards resolution of the crisis (David, 2011). The use of crises response strategies is for reducing negative influence, prohibiting negative behavioural intentions, and repairing the reputation. The strategies of crises response are related to the actions and words beyond a crisis which was widely studied in management and communication (Coombs, 2007).

In image crisis case, restoring the image is critical for the institutions that depend on the perception of the public (Masduki, 2015). Restoring the image of organisations and removing the threat to their legitimacy following a crisis event, requires them to offer justifications, explanations, excuses, and apologies to their audiences (Ray, 1999). Image refers to the perception of the public about organisations or individuals (Chimbarange et al., 2013). The use of image was as a synonym of other concepts such as

reputation, perception, attitude, cognition, belief, credibility, message, communication, or relationship. "Image" is the held perception of individual, organisation, or group by their audience (Benoit, 1997a).

The theoretical framework of this study is Image Repair Theory by Benoit (1995) which is one of the most proper developmental approaches in crisis communication. This theory is related to crisis response and its aim is to understand the available options of communication for individuals or organisations once their reputation is threatened (Benoit, 2005).

Image repair theory contains five main strategies. (1) Denial strategy: contains simple denial through denying of committing or performing the offensive act, or shift the blame through mentioning that the act is performed by others. (2) Evasion of responsibility: it includes four sub-strategies which are: Provocation through mentioning that the act was response for another act, defeasibility about the lack of information, accident by stating the action was a mishap, and good intention by saying that the act was performed with good intentions. (3) Reducing offensiveness of event: this strategy includes six sub-strategies: bolstering through stressing on good qualities or effects of individuals or organisations, minimisation through reducing the severity or seriousness of the act, differentiation by showing that the act is less offensive than other similar acts, transcendence by stressing on the values or more important ends of that act, attack accuser by minimising the credibility of the accuser, and compensation by reimburse victims and compensate the harmed party. (4) Corrective action: through solving the problem or preventing its recurrence. (5) Mortification: through confessing or admitting the wrongdoing act, or apologising and asking for forgiveness (Benoit, 1997a, 1997b; Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997).

2. Problem Statement

In crisis situation, efficient and effective communication is critical and essential matter. Failing in understanding and measuring what happened, and failing in following the major principles of crisis communication leads to disastrous and far-reaching consequences. Protecting the reputation is a main goal of crisis communication (Anthonissen, 2008). Effective crisis communication has the ability to eliminate or alleviate the crisis and might improve the reputation greater than it was before the crisis (Fearn-Banks, 2007).

Doubtlessly, public figures and politicians often face crises at some points, and their reputation becomes highly valuable. Image repair of the reputation of public and political figures becomes essential once their reputations are threatened. Also, in political communication, the discourse of image repair is central to the role of media (Chimbarange et al., 2013). Image is essential to different types of organisations and individuals including governments, corporations and not profits (Benoit, 1997b).

Hence, repairing the threatened and tarnished image of Russia became essential to defend its image and cope with the crisis. Yet, not much is known about the strategies used by Russia to defend its image and how it has handled this crisis.

3. Research Questions

Based on the problem statement, this study has two main research questions:
▪ What image repair strategies were employed by Russia in response to MH17 crisis?

▪ How image repair strategies were employed by Russia in response to MH17 crisis?

4.   Purpose of the Study

This study mainly aimed to examine which image repair strategies were used by Russia beyond the crisis of downing MH17 crisis. The study also aimed to examine how those strategies were employed especially in response to the Western world accusation for supporting the perpetrators of this incident.

5.   Research Methods

Both quantitative and qualitative content analysis were conducted to answer the research questions and achieve the purpose of this study. Quantitative analysis allows generalisation of study and qualitative gives in-depth understanding of the issue. The quantitative content analysis focused more on the strategies used by Russia, while the qualitative content analysis focused more on the how those strategies were used.

The news stories were collected through keyword search in New Straits Times Website and also through its established link for the issue of MH17. The chosen time frame in this study was from July 2014 to December 2019. A total of 306 news stories pertaining to the issue of study were found and analysed. Then, a total of 191 strategies were found in 123 news stories since some of these stories included more than one strategy.

The coding sheet was the main instrument for gathering the data of this study. Then these stories were coded by both researchers. After the agreement on the instructions and the guidelines of coding between the coders, the inter-coder reliability was performed independently to ensure the validity and avoid the personal bias. After coding the news stories by the two coders, the overall intercoder reliability was 0.89 based on Holsti's formula (1969). The unit of analysis in this study was each single full news story. The main focus in the news stories was on the verbal contents rather than the visual contents. To answer the research questions both computer-assisted and human content analysis were used in this study. The data were keyed in SPSS programme for the statistical analysis to generate the results of this study.

6.   Findings

This section analyses the image repair strategies used by Russia and how they were used as covered by *New Straits Times* online website. In order to answer the first question about the strategies used by Russia, two tables explain this. Table 01 shows the image repair strategies by Russia as covered by NST. As discussed in the earlier section that 306 news stories were analysed, a total of 123 stories of them included 191 strategies since some stories contained more than one strategy.

The coverage of NST showed that Russian depended mainly on two main image repair strategies, namely denial and reducing offensiveness. The Russian defence relied heavily on denial strategy by using its both sub strategies, simple denial and shift the blame. In comparison, among the sub strategies of reducing offensiveness, only attack accuser was used. The table below shows that simple denial was the most prominent strategy with 43.5%, followed by shift the blame and attack accuser with 35.1% and 21.5% respectively. Other strategies might be used by Russia but not covered by NST.

Table 1. Image repair strategies used by Russia

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Simple denial	83	43.5
Shift the blame	67	35.1
Attack accuser	41	21.5
Total	191	100.0

A comparison of distribution of frequency on the image repair strategies covered by NST was made. Table 02 shows the volume or distribution of image repair strategies over the timeframe of this study from July 2014 to December 2019. Out of 191 strategies, 73.3% were used in 2014 which was the year of the incident, followed by 12.6% in 2015. Then the use of the strategies decreased in the next following years. The distribution of strategies shows although, many years have passed since that incident, yet Russia kept defending its position. Using the strategies by Russia over these years was due to failure to find the perpetrators of this incident.

Table 2. Annual distribution of image repair strategies

Year	Frequency	Percentage
2014	140	73.3
2015	24	12.6
2016	5	2.6
2017	3	1.6
2018	10	5.2
2019	9	4.7
Total	191	100.0

This section answers the second research question regarding how image repair strategies were used by Russia. It also presents several strategies from different news stories for example but not limited to the total number of strategies. These strategies used by several governmental bodies and officials including the Russian President Vladimir Putin, his spokesman, Kremlin, and others.

As mentioned in the earlier section, that the coverage of NST revealed that the Russian defence depended mainly on three sub-strategies of image repair, namely simple denial, shift the blame, and attack accuser, while the other sub-strategies were excluded in the coverage of NST. The defence of President Putin included all the three sub-strategies. First, President Putin also simply denied the allegations by both Australian and Dutch governments that MH17 was brought down by Russian missile "*In May 2018 the Dutch and Australian governments said they would hold Russia responsible for the plane's destruction after investigators traced the "Buk" missile system they said was used to bring it down to the 53rd Anti-Aircraft Brigade, based in the western Russian city of Kursk. Responding at the time, President Vladimir Putin said the airliner was not brought down by a Russian missile*" (NST, 2019, February 8).

Another denial strategy used by Putin came on the tongue of Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak by saying that "*Putin also denied that Russia had the capability to shoot down the aircraft, although Ukraine had claimed that an anti-air missile shot down the plane*" (NST, 2014, July 19).

Second, shift the blame strategy was accompanied with attack accuser by President Putin in response to both the Western world and Ukrainian accusations for supporting the rebels. His blaming to Ukraine as a response to the Western world accusation reflects shifting the blame strategy while blaming Ukraine as a response to its accusation reflects attack accuser strategy. President Putin blamed Ukraine for the downing of Malaysia Airways plane by saying "i*t was responsible for the unrest in its Russian-speaking eastern regions*" (NST, 2014, July 18).

Third, attack accuser strategy was used after the Ukrainian accusation to Russia for supporting the rebels for destroying the crash site. President Putin fired back by saying that Ukraine held the responsibility of the crash by saying that "*Ukraine "bears responsibility" for the crash. "This tragedy would not have happened if there was peace in the country, if military operations had not resumed in the south-east of Ukraine*" (NST, 2014, September 10).

On the other hand, the point of view of two different Malaysian governments was consistent with the official Russian response and totally supportive for it. During the tenure of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak in the year of the incident three news stories covered by NST. In the first story, Najib rejected to accusing any part and stressed on having a strong evidence first by saying "*We cannot deduce the conclusion based on a hunch. We must look into the matter based on hard evidence and irrefutable facts"… "Our position is that to establish the facts first and getting involved in the geopolitical tension, games or the (political) complexity in that area… "We are only interested to establish the facts and as soon as we get our hands on it*" (NST, 2014, July 19).

In the second news story, Najib rejected pointing finger at Russia as what the Western world did by saying that "*Malaysia, would not point fingers at any party until there was irrefutable evidence that the aircraft had been downed by a missile"… "we are not pointing fingers at anyone until the facts have been obtained"…"such a geopolitical conflict brought no benefit and only caused more suffering*" (NST, 2014, July 24).

In the third story, Najib stress on the objectivity of Malaysia regarding this issue by saying that "*Malaysia has always taken a very objective position. Instead of finger-pointing, we would rather wait for the final investigation report to conclude what has really happened to MH17*" (NST, 2014, November 11).

Moreover, five years after the incident during the tenure of Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was also supportive for Russia which discussed in three stories, two of them in the same day. He said called "*the move by Dutch-led investigators to charge three Russians and a Ukrainian with murder for the 2014 disaster "ridiculous" and "politically motivated" against Moscow. In another story on the same date he said that: "Malaysia wants ironclad proof that Russia actually shot down Malaysia Airlines flight MH17"… "government wanted proof of guilt that Russia did it"… " the accusations made against three Russians and one Ukrainian were politically motivated against Russia"…"So far there's no proof, only hearsay"… Malaysia was "very unhappy" because from very beginning the tragedy became a political issue which saw Russia being accused of such wrongdoings even before the case was examined"… "It is very difficult for us to accept that*" (NST, 2019, June 20).

Mahathir also, expressed his unhappiness from the results of the investigation regarding this issue by saying that "*Malaysia was unhappy with the latest report on the downing of flight MH17 and asked for proof, not just hearsay, in the investigation*" (NST, 2019, June 28).

7.   Conclusion

The coverage of *New Straits Times* revealed that simple denial and shift the blame the sub-strategies of denial, and attack accuser the sub-strategy of reducing offensiveness were used by Russia. The Russian defence was against the Western world allegation on its support to the perpetrators of downing MH17.

It is argued that, using denial strategy is effective when it can sustained and maintained in light of having an evidence about committing the wrong-doing. It is best to admit the wrong-doing and use corrective action in case of committing the wrong-doing. Additionally, coupling attack accuser strategy with other strategies such as denial makes it possible that this strategy functions best (Benoit & Anderson, 1996). Also, attack accuser strategy creates some sympathy from the public (Benoit, 1997a).

Hence, the use of those strategies proven its effectiveness and plausibility based on the argument above by Benoit. The Russian denial has sustained due to having no evidence against Russia to support the Western world allegations and accusations unless if new evidence appears in the future that incriminate Russia. Also, combining attack accuser strategy with denial in the Russian defence makes it more effective. Attack the Western accusers by Russia helped to garner the sympathy of the public.

On the other hand, the point of view of two different Malaysian governments has boosted the Russian defence. Malaysia was objective and defended Russia in the face of the Western world accusations, and also rejected to point finger at Russia without evidence. Thus, gave more credibility to the Russian defence strategies in response to the non-evidence based accusations especially due to the historical American antipathy to Russia.

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