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Tan, Kevin Kok-Yew; Pang, Augustine; Kang, Janelle Xiaoting

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Breaking bad news with CONSOLE:

Toward a framework integrating medical protocols with crisis communication

1. Introduction

Communicating bad news is arguably one of the hardest tasks in crisis communication. As defined by Buckman (1984), ‘bad news’ negatively alters a person’s perspective of the future, and should hence be tactfully approached. Practitioners not only have to establish facts quickly to share, more critically, they have to manage the emotional upheavals of affected stakeholders. Current frameworks, while extensive, may not be sufficient to equip practitioners with the tactical nuance to communicate bad news. Furthermore, most crisis response strategies studies were examined from the organizational perspective rather than from the stakeholders’ perspectives (Coombs, 2006).

To address these gaps, this study goes beyond crisis communication theories and dives into the medical field to draw insights from the best practices adopted by medical practitioners who need to communicate bad news to patients regularly. Potentially the first study to marry crisis communication and medical protocols, this study proposes the CONSOLE framework as a tactical guide to equip organizations with the know-how to communicate bad news empathetically. CONSOLE framework is developed by merging selected components of established medical protocols of SPIKES (Baile *et al.*, 2000) and COMFORT (Villagran, Goldsmith, Wittenberg-Lyles & Baldwin, 2010). The framework is applied relevantly to crisis contexts derived through situational analyses in accordance to existing crisis communication literature, thus converting medical best practices in communicating bad news from a one-to-one context to a one-to-many context over mass communication platforms such as social

media.

Four aviation crises – Malaysia Airlines MH370 and MH17, AirAsia QZ8501 and Asiana Airlines OZ214 – were chosen to examine how CONSOLE can be applied. Aviation crises were chosen due to their vulnerabilities and complexities in nature as they are large-scale events that involve numerous stakeholders, receive considerable media coverage, and are characterised by surprise, threat, uncertainty, time pressures, and extreme emotions (Ray, 1999; Howell, 2015). Data was collected from social media posts during the height of each of these crises to examine how and if these aviation organizations responded efficiently, effectively and appropriately. Insights from this study can help practitioners build on their repertoire on how to communicate bad news during crises.

2. Literature review

2.1 Organizational Responses During Crises

Organizations in crises face the daunting and inevitable task of having to communicate bad news to its stakeholders. The communication of negative news needs to be handled with care to preserve the organizations' reputation and sustain various stakeholders' confidence, goodwill and purchase intentions. Research in crisis communication focusing on shaping organizational strategies in response to a crisis has relied on the Image Repair (IR) and the Situational Crisis Communication (SCCT) theories for analyses. Arguably, these are the two dominant theories in crisis research. The former focuses on texts (Benoit, 2015), while the latter extends to contexts, like the organization's crisis history and relationship history (Coombs, 2015a). Frandsen and Johansen (2017) further distinguished text and context oriented

researches which this paper subscribes to.

Image Repair Theory has been described as the “dominant paradigm for examining corporate communication in times of crises” (Dardis & Haigh, 2009, p. 101). The theory, which is an extension of apologia (Coombs, Frandsen, Holladay, & Johansen, 2010) asserts that an organization’s credibility largely depends on its image. Image plays a crucial role in building and maintaining international relations (Zhang & Benoit, 2004). Threats to this image often necessitate massive efforts to repair it (Benoit & Brinson, 1999). SCCT argues that crisis response strategies can be used to protect reputational assets after the organization has instructed what stakeholders should do in times of crises (Coombs, 2008) and relies heavily on the level of crisis responsibility ascribed by the stakeholders to the organization (Coombs, 2015a). The theory offers 10 crisis response strategies grouped into three postures. Coombs (2008) argued that a posture “represents a set of strategies that share similar communicative goals and vary in terms of their focus on protecting the crisis victims” (p. 266). SCCT recommends that in crises related to product recall, technical error, mega-damage, accidents, human error or organizational misdeeds, the deal posture, which includes apology, can be used.

In the Malaysia Airlines’ crisis involving the disappearance of MH370 in 2014, it was heavily criticized for poor crisis management and lack of empathy in crisis responses, which was hugely detrimental to its reputation and called into question its ability to survive the crisis (Watson & Hagen, 2015). The importance of being compassionate in crisis responses in the early phases of crisis communication has been identified as being more valuable in assisting reputational recovery than mere instructional

responses (Coombs, 1999). Studies have shown that understanding the stakeholders' emotions can help the organization pre-empt its likely receptivity to the organization's crisis responses (Kim, *et al.*, 2011). The Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) model is a framework developed to understand stakeholders' emotions (Jin, Pang & Cameron, 2007). It emphasizes understanding the publics' emotions in different crisis types, and to base the crisis response to address these emotions. Empirical tests found that the predominant emotions identified during crises were anxiety, anger, fright and sadness, with anxiety as a predominant emotion in all crisis types. Stakeholders would deal with crises psychologically (known as cognitive coping) and/ or take on concrete actions to manage their situations (known as conative coping) (Jin, *et al.*, 2012). Being aware of the emotions of its audiences can help the organization to better tailor its communication strategies to fulfil these emotional needs (Fearn-Banks, 2002). While ICM provides a systematic approach to appreciating stakeholders' emotions during crises, there is still a need for practitioners to develop crisis responses to convey the intended compassion to stakeholders.

Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (2007) is a pivotal framework that identifies the relevant crisis response strategies applied to specific crisis contexts. Based on SCCT, organizations should select their crisis response strategy in relation to the organization's level of crisis responsibility and the reputation threat facing the organization. The strategies include deny (to delink organization from the crisis), diminish (to reduce the seeming impact of the crisis in stakeholders' eyes) and rebuild (to accept responsibility and make amends to facilitate reputation recovery). While it provides a structured way to assess a crisis situation and respond accordingly, the theory looks mainly from the organizations' perspective

in assessing the crisis situation.

2.2 Social Media Use during Crises

The increasing use of social media has provided organizations additional platforms to engage its stakeholders swiftly in times of crises. Studies have shown that social media could both be a trigger and facilitator in crisis (Alfonso, *et al.*, 2008). In the Domino's Pizza case, its crisis arose when two misbehaving employees uploaded a YouTube video of themselves stuffing cheese into the nose, and mixing it with mucus onto the sandwich they were making, plus breaching other health-code regulations. Within a few days, the video went viral and Domino Pizza's reputation took a nose-dive (Clifford, 2009). Domino Pizza's CEO wasted no time in uploading his response on YouTube by apologizing for the incident and promised corrective measures while giving assurance of quality food preparation. Social media is thus a double-edged sword in both escalating and containing a crisis (Siah, *et al.*, 2010).

Studies have examined the effectiveness of crisis responses on social media. For instance, Twitter has been found to be most effective at spreading information quickly and should be managed carefully (Schultz, *et al.*, 2011) as such social media platforms could enable the instant two-way primary communication (Fowler, 2017), but have their constraints based on the Media Richness Theory of not improving task equivocality (Dennis & Kinney, 1998), not communicating on point or influencing understanding (Dennis & Valacich, 1999), and lacking paralinguistic cues (Kruger *et al.*, 2015). The social-mediated crisis communication (SMCC) model was introduced to examine how publics consume crisis information via social media as compared to

other sources (Jin, *et al.*, 2011). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are often used to gain insider information and connect with family and friends for emotional support during crises (Austin, *et al.*, 2012). In considering crisis communication via social media in application to the crisis situations, there were further empirical studies in the marriage of SMCC and SCCT theories, such as linking the crisis communication form and source to the publics' perception of the crisis situation and emotions towards the organization-in-crisis (Liu, *et al.*, 2011). The participatory information dissemination culture that social media brings makes crisis communication increasingly challenging with the speed and multiplicity of information exchange (Husain *et al.*, 2014). This paper focuses on how organizations leverage social media platforms Facebook and Twitter to communicate bad news to its stakeholders. Noting the potential of social media platforms to detect sentiments of the audiences (Oh, Agrawal & Rao, 2013), organizations like the airlines mentioned in this research should optimize the potential of social media for two-way communication with its intended audience (Coombs, 2015b) instead of limiting to one-way communication.

2.3 Breaking Bad News in the Medical Field

It is argued that current crisis communication frameworks, though extensive, are not sufficient to provide guidance to communicate bad news to stakeholders. For instance, even though the ICM model is positioned as a framework to understand stakeholders' emotions, it does not offer guidance on how to speak to stakeholders who are experiencing emotional trauma. To address this gap, we dive into the medical literature for insights. Medical professionals regularly need to break negative news to patients, such as terminal illnesses or distraught pregnancy conditions. There has been extensive research on how medical professionals can deliver bad news (Buckman &

Kason, 1992; Girgis & Sanson-Fisher, 1995). Similar to how crisis or disaster communication literature term as ‘crisis intervention’ or ‘psychological first aid’ (Roberts, 1990; Flannery & Everly, 2000; Shultz & Forbes, 2014), the two medical bad news delivery models, SPIKES and COMFORT, are triggered by critical events that disrupt common coping mechanisms (Flannery & Everly, 2000). Across some of the psychological first aid guidelines like Mid-term Mass Trauma Guidelines (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2007), National Guidelines on Psychosocial Interventions (Te Brake *et al.*, 2009), TENTS Guidelines (Bisson *et al.*, 2010), Mental Health First Aid Guidelines (Kelly, Jorm & Kitchener, 2010), and EUTOPA Guidelines (Vymetal *et al.*, 2011), the common focus is on the timely intervention to address or reduce the post-breakout trauma (Dielens *et al.*, 2014). SPIKES and COMFORT, on the other hand, are focused on the how instead of the when in addressing affected stakeholders.

2.3.1 SPIKES

The SPIKES model has been accepted as the standard guideline for breaking bad news in America and other countries (Teike Lüthi *et al.*, 2011; Wand *et al.*, 2011; Seifart *et al.*, 2014). SPIKES stands for *Setting*, *Perception*, *Invitation*, *Knowledge*, *Emotions*, and *Strategy* and *Summary* (Baile *et al.*, 2000). In this protocol, medical professionals should ensure a conducive *setting* for discussion with the patient on his or her condition, check the patient’s *perception* of the medical situation, seek the patient’s *invitation* to hear more information and updates, impart *knowledge* to the patient in a clear and understandable way, address the patient’s *emotions* by being empathetic in words and actions, and lastly, *summarize* the discussion and *strategize* next steps. The components of SPIKES are as shown in Table 1 (see Table 1).

While SPIKES has provided a systematic way to discuss bad news with patients, it is not without limitations. The main limitation is that it is a linear process which requires medical professionals to complete the steps sequentially and in doing so, disregard the interaction process with the patient which tends to be non-linear, dynamic and highly complex (Eggly *et al.*, 2006; Villagran *et al.*, 2010; Dean & Willis, 2016). Dean and Willis (2016) further criticized the model by highlighting its failure to recognize that bad news communication goes beyond a single touch point. The sequential approach of SPIKES would not be effective if it was to be religiously carried out without any contextualization. SPIKES also appear to only consider a one-to-one communication when breaking bad news. There will be cases where there are more audiences, and such communication models should allow for one-to-many communication (Eggly *et al.*, 2016).

2.3.2 COMFORT

To address the fluidity and dynamic nature of human interaction, the COMFORT framework is another medical protocol that has been widely lauded for being less rigid and more interaction-focused by allowing for reciprocity in the communication process (Steckler, 2012). COMFORT represents *Communication, Orientation, Mindfulness, Family, Ongoing, Reiterative* and *Team*. Similar to SPIKES, COMFORT suggested *communicating* with clarity by using both verbal and non-verbal cues, *orientating* the patient's understanding of topic or issue by framing the messages for easier reception, and being *mindful* about the patients and their families by forging a genuine connection to help them deal with the emotional distress of bad news. Several points unique to the framework were noting the importance of addressing *families* in the interaction, the need for *ongoing* communication,

reiterating essential facts to ease comprehension of bad news, and communicating that there would be the support of a *team* to assist the patient through the situation (Villagran *et al.*, 2010). The COMFORT components are as shown in Table 2 (see Table 2).

Even though both SPIKES and COMFORT are well-established protocols in the medical field for breaking bad news, no study has applied them in crisis communication. These protocols were developed based on one-to-one or small group interactions between the medical professional and the patient and his family, which is vastly different from the one-to-many interactions in times of crises where the organizations have to address multiple stakeholders. In addition, medical interactions are usually carried out face-to-face based on epistemic knowledge (Baile *et al.*, 2000), while crisis communication is often through the mass communication platforms of traditional or social media to fill the silence even when there is a lack of information (Fowler, 2017). This study aims to address this gap by developing a new framework that combines crisis communication theories with medical protocols to facilitate the communication of bad news to stakeholders in an empathetic manner.

2.4 Empathetic Communication in Crisis through CONSOLE

The CONSOLE framework is developed by drawing elements from SPIKES and COMFORT, integrated with the essence of crisis communication literature. From SPIKES, the *perception* of stakeholders in crises, ensuring stakeholders have sufficient *knowledge*, addressing stakeholders' *emotions*, and providing distraught stakeholders with options and solutions on the way forward through well-planned *strategies* were identified as being useful in the crisis communication context. From

COMFORT, clear *communication* to stakeholders during crises, *orientating* stakeholders to receive the bad news, being *mindful* of their emotions at the peak of crises, giving them *ongoing* updates to reassure them, *reiterating* consistent points across communication channels, and allocating resources to provide assistance *teams* to support the stakeholders through the crises, are deemed as important in conveying empathy and sensitivity to stakeholders. SPIKES highlights the need for strong leadership to strategize the way ahead for affected stakeholders, which is not found in COMFORT. Likewise, COMFORT suggests the additional components of providing ongoing updates, reiterating consistent messages and availing support teams, which are not offered by SPIKES. Hence, the crisis communication model CONSOLE posited integrates the best of both established medical protocols. Overlapping components from SPIKES and COMFORT were also identified and included in the new framework as they represent established practices found in both medical protocols.

CONSOLE is the acronym for *Coherence, Orientation, Nuance, Support, Ongoing, Leadership and Emotions*. For *coherence*, the organization repeats core messages over time, across platforms. This is also aligned with crisis communication literature, which found consistency to be an important element of successful crisis communication (Massey, 2001; Coombs, 2010). For *orientation*, the organization manages the stakeholders' perception by anticipating their concerns and tailoring the communication to meet their needs (Nikolaev, 2010). For *nuance*, the organization uses simple language to relate with the stakeholders and provide them with clear understanding of crisis information (Girgis *et al.*, 1995; Stephens, *et al.*, 2005). For *support*, it is important for organizations to mention the support teams put in place to

assist the stakeholders through the crisis journey, such as rescue personnel, enquiry channels, and industry allies (Joseph *et al.*, 1993). For *ongoing*, it is essential for organizations to engage the stakeholders continually to reassure them, failing which it might cause uncertainty, anxiety and depression in the stakeholders (Hogbin *et al.*, 1989, Newall *et al.*, 1987; Seifart *et al.*, 2014). For *leadership*, the organization should lead the way forward by providing solutions and alternatives to the stakeholders to instil hope and confidence and reduce anxiety (Baile *et al.*, 2000; Boin, *et al.*, 2003). This leadership also refers to taking ownership of the issue and providing guidance and assistance to the affected parties. In *emotions*, the organization's messages should exhibit sensitivity by using affective words to address the stakeholders' emotional needs (Jin *et al.*, 2012; Mast *et al.*, 2005). Putting together the components, the CONSOLE framework is as shown in Table 3 (see Table 3). For a more elaborate discussion of this framework, please see Table 4.

3. Research Questions

To examine the relevance of the CONSOLE model, this study posits the following research questions:

RQ1: Applying the CONSOLE framework, what are the strengths in the organizations' delivery of bad news?

RQ2: Applying the CONSOLE framework, what are the weaknesses in the organizations' delivery of bad news?

RQ3: Based on the CONSOLE framework, what aspects can organizations use to improve their communication of bad news during crises?

4. Method

4.1 Case Study

Case studies enable the examination of the peculiarity and context behind organizational processes and decisions (Gummeson, 2000; Eisenhardt, 1989) so as to draw important lessons and reference for future studies (Yin, 2006). This is pertinent when investigating the conveyance of bad news by organizations during crises using a newly developed framework like CONSOLE so that salient concepts could be examined to understand their applicability. Case studies allow for a longitudinal study of the selected cases across different sources of evidence (Yin, 2003). In this research, archived data from Facebook and Twitter are the sources of evidence to examine how organizations could enhance the bad news communication with CONSOLE. Case studies, however, might not provide a holistic review of the situation as it is often studied from outside the organizations examined.

In this study, four aviation crises were examined through textual analysis of the social media posts by the affected organizations using the CONSOLE framework. Textual analysis is an approach of qualitative content analysis that allows selective focus on certain aspects of the predominantly textual content, in such a way that quantitative features could be derived (Fairclough, 2003; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In the context of this research, it allows the translation of the content from social media posts into binary outcomes for each of the aspects of the CONSOLE framework. Aviation crises were selected as they are sudden and unexpected in nature, similar to the dynamism of crises organizations face. Aviation accidents, especially those involving the loss of life, attract high attention from the public (Howell, 2015). The convolution of cases also allows this research to examine deeper on the decision-making processes of

organizations (Pinfield, 1986), especially through the lens of the CONSOLE framework. These aviation crisis cases also represent different crisis types. Based on SCCT, MH370 and MH17 are categorized as low organizational responsibility events while AirAsia QZ8501 and Asiana Airlines OZ214 are categorized as high organizational responsibility events (Coombs, 2008).

4.1.1 Asiana Airlines OZ214

On the morning of 6 July 2013, Asiana Airlines OZ214, a scheduled flight from Seoul to San Francisco, crashed into the runway at San Francisco International Airport during landing. The accident resulted in three casualties, 181 injured with 12 critically injured (Lin & Lucas, 2015). The cause of the crash was subsequently attributed to pilots' error due in large part to their limited understanding and over-reliance on the flight automation system.

4.1.2 Malaysia Airlines MH370

Coined as aviation's greatest mystery (Quest, 2016), the search for MH370 has been ongoing even after more than three years. MH370 was carrying 239 passengers and crew when it went missing. This aviation crisis has not established a closure till date.

4.1.3 Malaysia Airlines MH17

MH17 was travelling from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur on 17 July 2014, when it was shot down near the Ukraine-Russia border, killing all 283 passengers and 15 crew. The case attracted international attention and efforts to find and bring the culprits to justice. Even as investigations concluded that MH17 was downed by a

Russia-made missile fired from Donetsk, controlled by pro-Russia fighters, both Russia and the rebel group in Donetsk have denied the allegations and lamented that the investigations were politically influenced (Roy, 2016).

4.1.4 AirAsia QZ8501

AirAsia Flight QZ8501 departed from Surabaya, Indonesia for Singapore before dawn on Sunday, 28 Dec 2014. Shortly after take-off, the pilot contacted the Indonesia air traffic control about heavy cloud, but lost contact with the air traffic control soon after. There were 162 people on board. The search operations ended on 20 Mar 2015 after 106 bodies were recovered. There were no survivors.

4.2 Data Collection

Since social media has become the catalyst that exacerbates crises (Siah, *et al*, 2010), we examined the data based on social media posts. Data derived allow the researchers to analyze the communication effectiveness of the respective organizations in breaking bad news. Jin, Pang and Cameron (2012) described the first month following the break of a crisis to be the height of crises while Vasterman (2005) presented data of media-hype news waves typically within a month from the crisis breakout.

Correspondingly, this research drew data from within the first month of the crises. From the crisis intervention literature, early intervention was also defined as within the first four weeks following a traumatic event (Roberts, 1990). This reinforces the consistency across communication fields that crises or critical events follow a cycle towards recovery, and this cycle is typically in the span of one month from the breakout. Only Facebook and Twitter posts were collected as both were two of the

most popular social media platforms (Smith *et al.*, 2012) which the organizations in this study utilized.

QZ214: Within the first month of the incident, Asiana Airlines made 10 Facebook posts (4,544 “Likes”) and 13 Tweets (337 “Favorites”).

MH370: During the crisis peak in the first month, Malaysia Airlines posted 54 Facebook messages (4,688 “Likes”) and 55 Tweets (20,411 “Favorites”). Most of the messages were official announcements, which provided information updates and showed support for the families and loved ones of the passengers and crew. Some of the posts also highlighted the international efforts of 26 nations in search of the missing plane.

MH17: In the first month of the crisis, Malaysia Airlines posted 28 Facebook messages (4,442 “Likes”) and 36 Tweets (28,332 “Favorites”). Malaysia Airlines’ messages typically provided information updates, expressed sadness about the incident, vouched determination in the investigation, encouraged the stakeholders, and used denial to absolve itself of any fault in the incident.

QZ8501: AirAsia utilized Facebook from the start of the crisis by appending their news releases to their Facebook page and posting daily updates till 4 Feb 2015. There were 42 Facebook posts (35,481 “Likes”) and 32 posts on Twitter (11,453 “Favorites”). AirAsia did not post unique or differentiated posts on their official Twitter account throughout the crisis. All their tweets and replies were links to their Facebook posts. The Twitter posts lasted from the start of the crisis till 24 Jan 2015. Interestingly, AirAsia did not post anything on social media regarding the cessation of the search and rescue operation.

4.3 Data Analysis

Textual analysis of archived data was chosen for the data analysis. This approach would be more suitable for identifying the essence of the data compared to a quantitative approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). A deductive method through textual analysis was used by coding the data according to the CONSOLE framework. Data from the first month of crisis breakout were retrieved for each case and frivolous posts were filtered out.

Four research assistants were enlisted to assist in the content analysis. Each researcher referred to the CONSOLE framework matrix (see **Appendix 1**) for the coding of each social media post on the affected organization's official Facebook and Twitter. The coding was translated to binary scores for each post under the CONSOLE framework. For example, when there is a repetition of core messages in the social media post, Coherence is present. This social media post will get one point for displaying coherence. A perfect social media crisis communication message will score a perfect seven points if it fulfils all aspects of CONSOLE. Through the triangulation of data across different junctures of the crisis, and across the different social media platforms (when the organization does not have Twitter account, data analysis was conducted on the same platform by another research assistant), phenomena are established (Yin, 2012).

Milestones were identified in each case for the analysis as each case is unique in how the organizations and stakeholders reacted and how things panned out. The milestones allowed each case to be split into four junctures based on the situation of the case and to attribute stakeholder response between milestones to the former milestone. The milestones (see Figures 1 to 4) for the cases studied include the shift of search area

and progress of search for MH370; the update of passenger information and well-being for OZ214; the discovery and retrieval of the crashed MH17; and the discovery of the debris and bodies of crew and passengers from QZ8501.

6. Findings

RQ1 examines the strengths in the organizations' delivery of bad news, based on the CONSOLE framework. Overall, organizations were found to be strong in communicating *Coherence*, *Orientation* and *Nuance*.

6.1 Organizations' Communication Through Facebook During Crises Strengthens the Delivery of Coherent and Simple Messages

The analysis showed that Facebook was a better platform in conveying *Coherence*, *Orientation* and *Nuance* when breaking bad news as compared to Twitter. In the example of Malaysia Airlines' communication efforts for MH370 through Facebook and Twitter, most of Malaysia Airlines' Facebook posts were replicated on their Twitter account in order to ensure coherence and consistency in its communication efforts. For the case of AirAsia's QZ8501, which fulfilled the criteria for C, O and N, an extract from one of the posts published on 28 December 2014 at 11.41am wrote:

“AirAsia Indonesia regrets to confirm that flight QZ8501 from Surabaya to Singapore has lost contact with air traffic control at 07:24hrs this morning. At the present time we unfortunately have no further information regarding the status of the passengers and crew members on board, but we will keep all parties informed as more information becomes available...”

The QZ8501 case was unique as Twitter was not used for the communication. *Coherence* was fulfilled through the tone of the messages across the various posts for

the same campaign (QZ8501) in the same platform (Facebook). *Orientation* was fulfilled through the provision of information for the case, whether there was any. *Nuancing* could be seen when organizations refrained from using technical jargons. In the case of QZ8501, technical jargons like barometric readings on the aircraft, atmospheric conditions leading to the systems malfunction, and hydrographic technologies used to map the sea floor for the location of the debris (Rahadian *et al.*, 2015) were avoided so as not to confuse the audience. Extracts from one of the posts for QZ8501 by AirAsia which displayed its nuancing to avoid technical jargons was published on 6 January 2015 at 8pm:

“... The weather (for the search) was cloudy with light rain and waves at 2-3 meters. However, the underwater current is still strong around 4-5 knots and the visibility is still limited for the sea divers to identify more findings from under the sea...”

AirAsia could have used sea state, a common reference term for aviators and sailors, to describe the situation, instead it used layman terms like wave altitude and visibility in its official releases. In terms of nuancing, it was found that these organizations used simple language and avoided technical jargons in their communication. In the case of Malaysia Airlines' MH370, due to the large number of Chinese passengers on board, the press releases and social media posts had translations to aid the understanding by the families and friends of the victims. These were especially important as most of the Chinese relatives were not conversant in English. Of significance, volunteers were called upon to help Malaysia Airlines break the language barriers with the next-of-kin by providing translations for its updates to both the Malay and the Chinese (Lee & Han, 2014).

RQ2 examines the weaknesses in the organizations' delivery of bad news, based on the CONSOLE framework. Organizations did not fare as well in the *Support*, *Ongoing*, *Leadership* and *Emotions* components across both Facebook and Twitter social media platforms.

6.2 Emotional Aspects of Communication During Crises Require More Emphasis from Organizations

The poor showing of *Emotions* was especially observed in the cases of AirAsia QZ8501 and Asiana OZ214. In both cases, the official releases from the organizations' websites, which were carried by their Facebook pages only stated the information on the case but did not express any regret or sympathy. For AirAsia QZ8501, it was ascertained that most of the showing of empathy were done through its chairman Tony Fernandes's Twitter account (Brajawidagda, Chatfield & Reddick, 2015). For Asiana OZ214, the updates remained factual and emotionless, as seen in an extract from its Press Release on 8 Jul 2013:

“Asiana would like to provide a brief update regarding the status of HL7742 (registration number of OZ214)...

Asiana Airlines is providing airfare and lodging for families of the passengers. In the event that the number of family members seeking support increases, Asiana is also preparing to operate additional charter flights...

Asiana Airlines will continue to exert great effort in providing assistance and on the ongoing investigation.”

On 9 Jul 2013, it was revealed prematurely by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) that OZ214 might have crashed due to pilot error (Matthew, 2013). Instead of addressing the issue or quelling it with display of emotions or regret,

Asiana's posts from 10 Jul 2013 onwards were short posts providing contact information. Asiana's post on 10 Jul 2013 is as follows:

"We have additional toll-free numbers for passengers and family: US: 866-528-8241 / KR: 080-233-4000 / CN: 400-650-8905."

Coincidentally, in these two aviation cases, the airlines were deemed to have high responsibility in the crises. In AirAsia QZ8501, the pilot was reported to have lost control of the plane, which had flown despite poor weather conditions, and for Asiana OZ214, the crash was attributed to pilot error (Knudson, 2016). These airlines, as seen in the extracts above, stuck to providing updates on the situation, and seemed to avoid showing emotions towards the affected stakeholders. Such a strategy could have been used by the airlines to minimize reputational damage should the investigation results turn against them.

RQ3 examines aspects organizations can improve on in their communication of bad news during crises, based on the CONSOLE framework. Findings from RQ1 and RQ2 were drawn in the examination of this question.

6.3.1 Empathetic Messaging Should Be Consistent and Sustainable Across Campaign

Findings from RQ1 suggested that the airlines exhibited relative strengths in communicating *Coherence*, *Orientation* and *Nuance* components of the CONSOLE framework. These commendable efforts could be sustained across milestones of the crisis peak and different social media platforms. For example, for MH370 crisis, Malaysia Airlines showed deficiency in almost all CONSOLE framework

components at the crisis occurrence when the flight was first discovered missing, with the exception of *Coherence*. This could be due to the initial shock and lack of preparedness for the airline to show up immediately. However, the initial stage of crisis would be a time when the stakeholders need most reassurance and comfort. Another example would be the MH17 crisis, when Malaysia Airlines was strong initially but later became weak in the areas of *Coherence*, *Orientation* and *Nuance*, approaching the end of the crisis peak period. This could be due to the lack of a clear outcome on the investigation results, which led the airline to shift away from the issue in the hope that it would cease to be the stakeholders' focus.

Besides not sustaining empathetic responses throughout the crisis stages, the airlines also showed visible differences in empathetic messaging across social media platforms. RQ1 findings also showed that albeit the strong showing in the *Coherence*, *Orientation* and *Nuance* components of the CONSOLE framework, this was more visible on Facebook rather than Twitter platform. AirAsia fared better in this aspect as it had linked its Twitter updates to Facebook updates to ensure that the communication was consistent across these social media platforms during the QZ8501 crisis.

6.3.2 Manage Display of Emotions Based on Crisis Responsibility

Findings from RQ2 suggested that the airlines generally showed deficiency in communicating *Support*, *Ongoing*, *Leadership* and *Emotions* of the CONSOLE framework. For the *Support* component, Malaysia Airlines MH370 and Asiana Airlines QZ214 fared better compared to Malaysia Airlines MH17 and AirAsia QZ8501. Asiana Airlines and Malaysia Airlines had focused on their corporate efforts

in rendering support to stakeholders during the crisis, albeit not communicating emotionally during this period. For the *Ongoing* component, the airlines had a visibly poor showing for MH370, MH17 and QZ8501 cases, while for QZ214 crisis, Asiana Airlines scored moderately better. Organizations should not neglect the provision of ongoing updates and the sustenance of dialogues with stakeholders, which will reassure them and reduce their anxiety. For the *Leadership* component, Malaysia Airlines and Asiana Airlines had moderately low show of leadership for MH370, MH17, and QZ214, while AirAsia had a significantly low leadership showing for QZ8501. Even though the organization might blame the crisis trigger on somewhat uncontrollable factors such as poor weather conditions, they could have exhibited stronger leadership in addressing the follow-up actions needed to assist the stakeholders. These reflections for QZ8501 are, however, limited to the data drawn from the airline's social media platforms, independent of their leadership's personal social media accounts. In the case of AirAsia, its CEO Tony Fernandes' social media presence during the crisis did shape the crisis communication outcome substantially, but not accounted for in this research due to the scope of examining crisis communication across official social media platforms.

For the *Emotions* component, it was interesting to observe that the airlines with higher attribution of crisis responsibility had poorer showing of emotions in their crisis communication. For MH370 and MH17 crises, Malaysia Airlines had a moderately low showing of *Emotions*, and AirAsia and Asiana Airlines had a drastically low showing of *Emotions*. Incidentally, AirAsia and Asiana Airlines had higher crisis responsibility as the air crashes were due to potential misjudgements or carelessness of the pilots. Organizations with higher attribution of crisis responsibility could make

more effort to show emotions in their crisis communication, instead of avoiding the risk of appearing vulnerable to stakeholders. However, organizations deemed to have lower crisis responsibility attribution could focus on showing empathy and compassion for the stakeholders rather than emotionally lamenting their indignation for being hapless victims in the crisis.

To sum up, while the organizations examined in this study were generally stronger in conveying *Coherence*, *Orientation* and *Nuance* in their crisis communication, they showed some signs of inconsistency across social media platforms and milestones of crisis peak period. Organizations could ensure that their empathetic crisis communication is consistent across their communication platforms by linking their Facebook updates to Twitter, or vice versa. Organizations could also invest efforts to sustain their empathetic crisis communication throughout the crisis peak period, particularly in large-scale tragedies such as the aviation crashes studied here, as the stakeholders' emotions are likely to remain raw and intense within the first month of crisis occurrence. Overall, organizations could improve their communication of bad news to stakeholders if they exhibit strengths and consistency in all criterion of the CONSOLE framework.

7. Discussion

7.1 *CONSOLE, the tact for breaking bad news which airlines lack*

OZ214 and QZ8501: As the cases of Asiana Airlines OZ214 and AirAsia QZ8501 were preventable crises whereby there was high attribution of crisis responsibility to the airlines, SCCT advocates that it should use the rebuild crisis response strategy to offer apology and compensations. Based on the ICM model, the predominant

emotions felt by the stakeholders would be anger and anxiety. By applying the CONSOLE framework, the airlines should be consistent in adopting the apologetic and regretful tone in its social media communication (*Coherence*). Unfortunately, Asiana Airlines changed their tone abruptly to a light-hearted one sooner than one month from the crisis, which might come across as being insincere and in wanting to move on quickly with its businesses even as their stakeholders' emotions were not settled. An example found on Asiana Airlines' Facebook that did not score on *Emotions* was:

“Hello Asiana followers! Thanks for all your concerns & well wishes these past few weeks. We'll start to tweet news & updates again soon! :)”

These airlines should also be prepared to answer all the questions and demands from their angry stakeholders for compensations due to injuries and casualties caused (*Orientation*). The airline leaders should show a strong social media presence by taking charge of the situation, and offering options and solutions (*Leadership*). They should be ready to use words and phrases of apology and regret, while showing deep compassion for the stakeholders (*Emotions*). In consolidation, the CONSOLE effects would be a more empathetic crisis response that would help to alleviate the stakeholders' anger and anxiety, and the spread of negativity towards the airlines.

MH370 and MH17: MH370 and MH17 had a moderate display of *Emotions* to stakeholders. Interestingly, these two aviation crises were cases whereby the airlines had low responsibility. For MH370, the mystery of the missing plane still dumbfounded the world; and MH17 was a victim caught in the embattled zone of

Ukraine and Russia. Unlike the cases of OZ214 and QZ8501, Malaysia Airlines was open in showing indignation, and grieving together with the loved ones of the crash victims. However, for both MH370 and MH17, Malaysia Airlines showed emotions in a delayed manner after two weeks had passed. This might have given the impression that they were unprepared to respond, making the emotive responses that came later sound less genuine. Malaysian Airlines would have fared better in bad news delivery to stakeholders if their responses had been emotive from the beginning. In the case of MH17, the airline's insistence on its clear plane maintenance records and approved flight paths might have clarified information for its stakeholders, but might not have helped to enhance its reputation, as stakeholders could perceive the airline as being defensive and more concerned with its reputation and potential business losses than the sufferings of the crash victims and their next-of-kin. Applying the CONSOLE framework components diligently would refine Malaysia Airlines' approach in breaking the bad news on social media in a holistic and empathetic manner.

7.2 Organizations showed strengths in traditional components of crisis communication

The organizations' stronger display of *Coherence*, *Orientation* and *Nuance* components of the CONSOLE framework could be attributed to these components being established factors of good communication strategies. After all, these essential factors of consistent messaging, pre-emptive approach and easily comprehensible information have been stressed by crisis communication scholars previously (Coombs, 2010; Nikolaev, 2010; Stephens, *et al.*, 2005). This study has shown that while these factors continue to be important anchors for crisis communication, they

are insufficient in constructing a convincing and empathetic crisis communication approach as there are gaps in which insights could be drawn from medical communication protocols. The added complexity in communication strategies could also be attributed to the proliferation of social media and users, complicating the communication approaches and pushing the notch up for the timeliness of information dissemination.

7.3 Organizations can draw valuable insights from medical communication protocols to improve crisis communication

For organizations to reinforce the level of empathy displayed in their crisis communication, they could deploy more resources and efforts in providing support facilities such as rescue teams and enquiry channels, and sustain their engagement with stakeholders throughout the crisis period. It is also important to involve their dominant coalition to think through the options and solutions for stakeholders going forward so as to instil hope and confidence. This would require additional effort from the organization to handle not only the current crisis situation but also to utilise the rebuild crisis response strategy to provide assistance in the post-crisis period. In addition, although addressing emotions has been highlighted as important in existing crisis communication models such as the ICM and SCCT, it was not apparent on the tactical approach. The CONSOLE framework suggests the generous and sincere use of affective words and phrases as a way of communicating empathy and compassion to stakeholders during crises.

8. Conclusion

Organizations inevitably face the possibility of having to deliver bad news during

crises, and failing to do well in this might permanently damage its reputation. However, crisis communication literature has been limited in offering a tactical guide on bad news delivery. This study looked beyond the crisis communication field into the medical field to draw the best practices from practitioners who handle bad news delivery on a regular basis in the medical context. The CONSOLE framework proposed by this study draws relevant insights from the established medical protocols of SPIKES and COMFORT, and applied them to a one-to-many corporate context. To test the applicability of CONSOLE framework, this study examined through four aviation crises, the strengths and weaknesses in organizations' delivery of bad news according to the CONSOLE framework. The study further explored how these organizations could have enhanced their bad news delivery utilizing the CONSOLE framework in conjunction with crisis communication theories like SCCT and ICM. The CONSOLE framework therefore guides the organization-in-crisis to deploy their resources to respond to its stakeholders holistically and empathetically, so as to safeguard its organization-stakeholder relationship and accelerate its reputational recovery.

Future studies could explore the testing of the CONSOLE framework across other forms of crises so as to assess the generalizability of these findings. In addition, a more insightful study could include analysing stakeholders' feedback through the voluminous Facebook and Twitter comments in order to gauge their receptivity to the different components of the CONSOLE framework. In addition, future studies could empirically test which portions of the medical protocols would be most applicable to crisis communication context, so as to build upon the rigour of the CONSOLE framework.

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Table 1: SPIKES Framework (Baile *et al.*, 2000)

S	etting
P	erception
I	nvitation
K	nowledge
E	otions
S	trategy & Summary

Table 2: COMFORT Framework (Steckler (2012)

C	ommunication
O	rientation
M	indfulness
F	amily
O	ngoing
R	eiterative
T	eam

Table 3: CONSOLE Framework

C	oherence	•Repetition of core messages
O	rientation	•Anticipate stakeholders' concerns and questions •Tailor the communication to meet their informational needs
N	uance	•Use of simple and unambiguous words and language, or explanation of technical terms
S	upport	•Mention of support team &/ channels
O	ngoing	•Communication is an ongoing, two-way engagement •Stakeholders have the opportunity to address their concerns and questions
L	eadership	•Organization takes the lead to show the way ahead and the options available to the stakeholders
E	mpathy	•Communicate messages high in emotional support •Exhibit sensitivity

Table 4: Operationalization of CONSOLE

Abbreviation	Code	Definition	Operationalised meanings	Examples
C	coherence	The same messages are repeated over time, and echoed by different representatives from the organization. This gives the messages emphasis and reinforces the organization's desired position during crisis. It also helps the public to familiarise with the bad news and may induce gradual acceptance.	Repetition of core messages	<p>Repetition of core messages, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Apologetic phases/words - Emphasising organization's commitment (e.g continuous search, persevere, provide updates, support, information and details) - Emphasising organization stance (e.g. accepting or denial of responsibility, mellowed promotions, appreciation of support) - Changes in look/feel of website to align with the sombre mood (e.g. dark sites, mellow colors, plain pages)
O	orientation	The organization attempts to anticipate stakeholders' concerns and questions and tailors the communication to meet their informational needs.	Pro-active and pre-emptive efforts to meet stakeholders' informational needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pro-active and pre-emptive information release (e.g. release of FAQs with statements, explanation of technical jargons) - Correction of misinformation / Confirmation of information
N	nuance	The choice of language and words in the communication is simple and unambiguous, facilitating different stakeholders' understanding of the crisis situation.	Simple language of communication, catering to the general level of understanding of the stakeholders involved.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Frequency of use of technical jargon - Frequency of use of uncommon vocabulary words. - Posts indicating messages/information are made available in different languages
S	support	The presence of a support team, beyond the singular presence of the newsbreaker/CEO, provides the stakeholders a sense of security. The	Articulation of support system put in place by the organization.	<p>Mentions of others involved in the support team, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Other employees - Rescue team

BREAKING BAD NEWS WITH CONSOLE

		organization is seen as giving its best by devoting resources to support the stakeholders during the crisis.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Foreign aid (e.g. other countries/airlines) - Medical support - Psychological/counselling support - Caregivers - Home support - Emergency response center
O	ngoing	The communication is a continuous, two-way engagement to ensure the stakeholders get the required attention and have their concerns and questions addressed.	Presence of continuous, two-way communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Frequency of updates - Posts reflecting holding statements - Provision of information/details - Ask for comments/suggestions/feedback - Provide enquiry channels
L	eadership	The organization takes the lead to show the way ahead and the options available to the stakeholders, thereby reducing anxiety.	Demonstrate being in control of the situation and providing forward plans and options.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Announcement of upcoming plans (e.g. we will deploy another 50 flights in the search effort, we will release more information) - Sharing of future strategy (e.g. we will look into enhancing flight security) to avoid incident from happening again - Providing options/solutions/redress to stakeholders - Company's policy changes (e.g. waiver of change fees, refund of tickets) - Taking responsibility for the crisis - Asking for suggestions to improve
E	mpathy	The organization's communication is person-centred and sensitive to the stakeholders' emotional needs, often	Exhibit sensitivity in the choice of affective words and phrases	Use of affective words and phrases, such as: deep regret, sincere condolences, heartfelt (e.g. close to our hearts,

BREAKING BAD NEWS WITH CONSOLE

		placing itself in their shoes.		break our hearts), encouragement lines (e.g. When the going gets tough, the tough gets going), sharing anxieties (e.g. every min is like an hour), prayers/thoughts, humbly ask, truly grateful, support - human-angled stories
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Figure 1: Milestones for Malaysia Airlines MH370

Period: 8 Mar 2014 to 7 Apr 2014

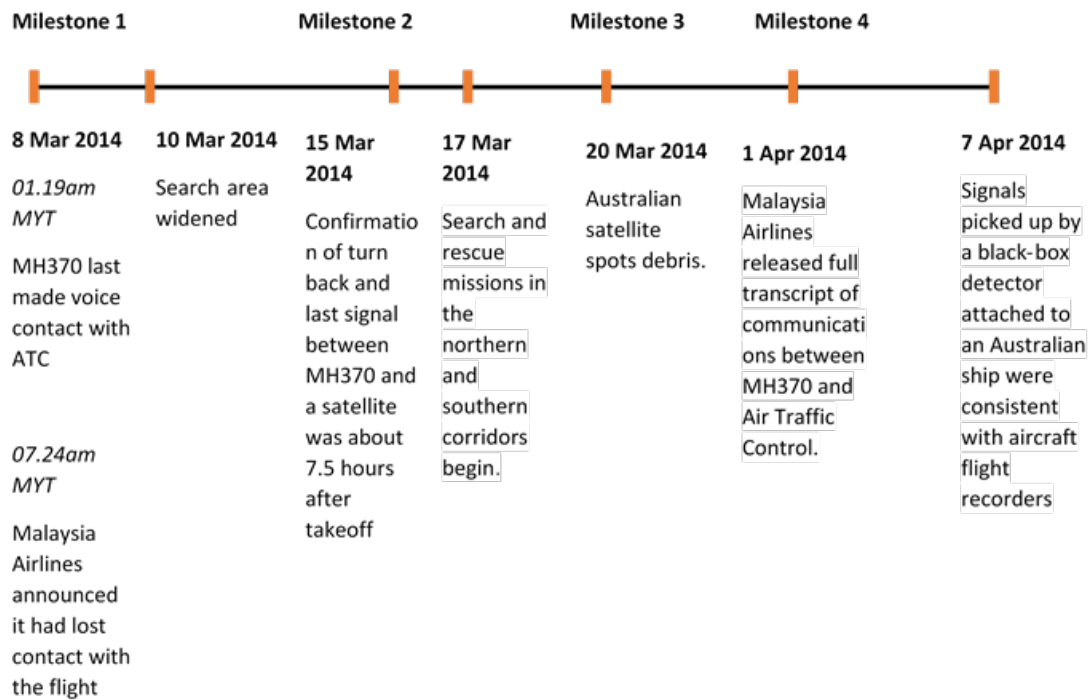


Figure 2: Milestones for Asiana Airlines OZ214

Period: 6 Jul 2013 to 3 Aug 2013



Figure 3: Milestones for Malaysia Airlines MH17

Period: 17 Jul 2014 to 16 Aug 2014

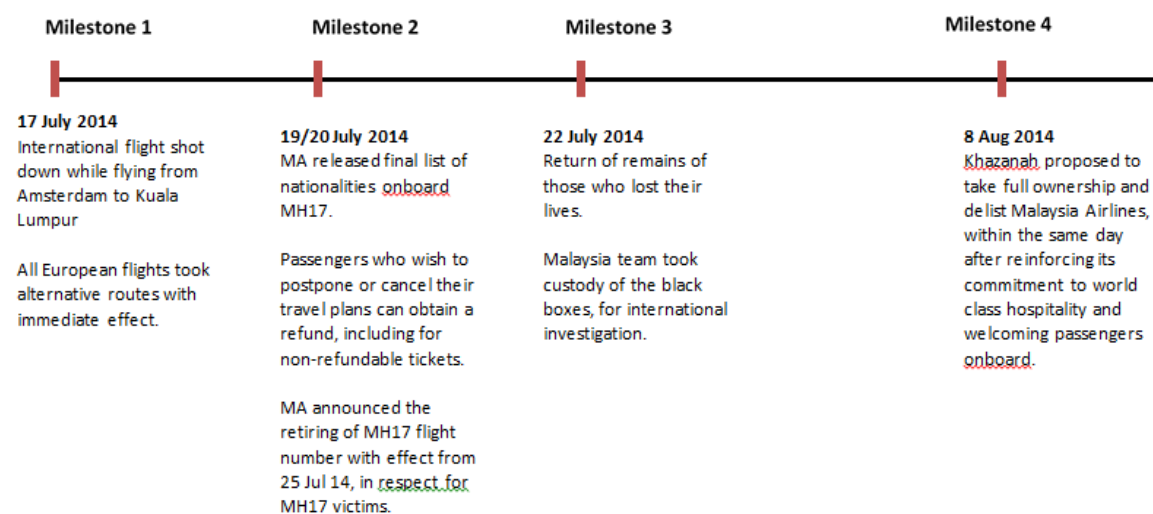


Figure 4: Milestones for AirAsia QZ8501

Period: 28 Dec 2014 to 23 Jan 2015

