



BERJAYA SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION & MEDIA ARTS
Faculty of Liberal Arts

FINAL EXAMINATION

Student ID (in Figures) :

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Student ID (in Words) :

Course Code & Name : **COM2624 Media Relations**
Trimester & Year : September – December 2020
Lecturer/Examiner : Renee Foong
Duration : 3 Hours

INSTRUCTIONS TO CANDIDATES

1. This question paper consists of 2 parts:
PART A (50 marks) : THREE (3) case study questions. Answers are to be written in the Answer Booklet provided.
PART B (50 marks) : TWO (2) Media release and feature story questions. Answers are to be written in the Answer Booklet provided.
2. Candidates are not allowed to bring any unauthorised materials except writing equipment into the Examination Hall. Electronic dictionaries are strictly prohibited.
3. This question paper must be submitted along with all used and/or unused rough papers and/or graph paper (if any). Candidates are NOT allowed to take any examination materials out of the examination hall.
4. Only ballpoint pens are allowed to be used in answering the questions, with the exception of multiple choice questions, where 2B pencils are to be used.

WARNING: The University Examination Board (UEB) of BERJAYA University College regards cheating as a most serious offence and will not hesitate to mete out the appropriate punitive actions according to the severity of the offence committed, and in accordance with the clauses stipulated in the Students' Handbook, up to and including expulsion from BERJAYA University College.

Total Number of pages = 7 (Including the cover page)

SECTION A (50 MARKS)

CASE STUDY

Answer **ALL** questions.

Online strategies during the emergency phase

Our analysis shows that in terms of exploiting online platforms to communicate during the crisis, Malaysia Airlines followed the guidelines set by International Air Transport Association (2016). The organisation was relatively quick in responding in the first few hours of the crisis. They immediately activated their 'dark website' – a pre- designed and otherwise hidden online page where press releases were posted and updated regularly (Alfonso & Suzanne, 2008). It is recommended to have this alternative website pre-prepared in case of a crisis, so that it may be quickly modified according to specific circumstances and either replace the existing regular website, or have a very visible link to it from the usual one. It is termed "dark" because it is associated with a serious crisis, often involving fatalities or significant damage to key publics; hence, it is normally designed in dark and sombre colours.

This practice is an indication that Malaysia Airlines is integrating the internet in their crisis communication (Coombs, 2009). On Malaysia Airlines' dark website, media statements were published both in English and Chinese to accommodate the diverse backgrounds of their key publics, as the majority of the passengers on board were from China (see Figure 5). They also quickly toned down the promotional content of their website and social media accounts including Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and their page on the Chinese microblogging site Weibo – a critical strategy used by airlines in crisis (Armon, 2010). Their social media pages also contained continuous updates about the situation. These practices reflect how social media can be utilised as a particular asset in communicating with the publics, removing the traditional barrier of news media and allowing the redemption of corporate reputation through a direct contact with the audience. Coombs (2018, p. 34) used the term "hub-and-spoke" to describe the role of the organisational website as a controlled hub of information and the social media as the spokes that contain links directing the audience back to the main hub. This is particularly useful in times of crisis, when providing a link to news releases via social media is more strategic and widespread.

Due to social media's immense impact during the crisis, the situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2007) recommends to include the value of strategic selection of social media types that best address the situation. A clear

indicator of Malaysia Airlines' adaptation of this strategy was its use of Weibo to join the conversation during the peak of the crisis, although it was described as "passive" (Zhang, Wang, Wu, Wang & Buck, 2018, p. 220). On the other hand, Malaysia Airlines' Twitter communication during the crisis was expressing empathy and concern for families and relatives of passengers (Howell, 2015), as an example of the emerging social-mediated crisis communication strategy (Cheng & Cameron, 2018; Jin, Liu & Austin, 2014).

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1. In response to the first few hours of the crisis, Malaysia Airlines (MAS) immediately activated their 'dark website'. Discuss **FIVE (5)** ways MAS has used online strategies in this matter effectively.

(15 marks)

Relationship with the media

After the first announcement confirming the disappearance of the flight MH370, the Malaysian authorities conducted daily press conferences, followed by media releases posted on the Malaysia Airlines website, initially twice a day. Press briefings were also conducted by high ranking officials of the government. These strategies benefitted the journalists that covered the event, and showed the professional management of the briefings (Howell, 2015). In addition, Malaysia Airlines deployed dedicated caregivers and Chinese translators to offer psychological support and comfort to families of the passengers (Malaysia Airlines, 2014f). The caregivers provided assistance and any available information to families, organised travel and accommodation for those who decided to fly to Malaysia, as well as looked for signs of extreme distress to refer such people for counselling. These specific actions were lauded in the public relations circles (Agnes, 2014) and also widely reported by the media.

Although the Malaysian authorities communicated promptly during the crisis, there were some aspects of their crisis communication management and media relations that were largely scrutinised. Most notably, various news reports raised the issue of imprecise and incomplete information being released by different spokespeople causing confusion and misinformation (e.g. Denyer, 2014; Fuller & Perlez, 2014; Hodal, 2014; Mader, 2014; Missing Malaysia, 2014). For instance, Group CEO Ahmad Jauhari Yahya was quoted by the media saying that the plane had been still in contact with air traffic controllers about

two hours into the flight (Jamieson, 2014). However, the Acting Minister of Transport Datuk Hishamuddin Tun Hussein was quoted saying that the last signal had been received less than one hour after it had taken off (Denyer, 2014). Hishamuddin was also quoted that four passengers of MH370 had travelled on stolen passports which officials later on changed to two. Furthermore, the Home Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi described the two passengers on fake passports as “Asian looking” but that was later denied by other officials (Sipalan, 2014).

The demand to fill the information void in MH370 crisis was driven not only by their key publics, for instance the families of victims, but also by the media’s requirement to produce news contents (Pang, 2013). This makes crisis management and crisis communication intricately connected turning every crisis into a crisis of information (Lagadec, 1993). When the communication with the flight stopped, Malaysia Airlines could not provide any specific information about it because the automatic tracking system of the plane had been shut down, as it was announced several days later. Why this happened was another question the Malaysian authorities were unable to answer, adding to the information void.

Malaysian media are not able to exercise the same freedoms as some of their international counterparts, which covered the disappearance of MH370, such as CNN, Reuters and nearly 300 others. Reporters without Borders (2015) rank Malaysia 147th out of 180 countries in its World Press Freedom Index. While this ranking comes from the Western perspective and may be criticised for its ethnocentric bias, the analysis of two Malaysian Sunday newspapers covering MH370 crisis suggests that both of them refrained from openly criticising the officials for the inadequate handling of the crisis (Halim, 2014). The English language newspaper, popular among the Chinese community in Malaysia, highlighted more openly the sufferings and plight of the relatives of passengers from China; however, it still did not voice any open criticisms, only implying that the Chinese publics could have been provided with better care and more empathy (Halim, 2014).

Used to loyal and self-censoring local media, the Malaysian authorities were unprepared to the demands and the level of detail required by international media sources. Feeling extreme pressure to provide any information that would explain the mystery of the disappearance of MH370, various officials chosen as spokespeople rushed to give some details that had not been verified properly and later often changed or disproved. While trying to provide some information to help the media in reporting on the accident, many of them were

criticised by international media for their mistakes and unprofessionalism, damaging the reputation of both Malaysia Airlines and all other government and civil bodies involved in the investigation of the accident. Nonetheless, it is important to consider that the airlines' negative relationship with the press is also rooted in the clash that frequently appears at the very point of information distribution in emergency situations, and partly due to the differences in primary agenda between public relations and journalism (Xifra & Sheehan, 2015). In addition, Pont (as cited in Xifra & Sheehan, 2015) highlights that the stiff media competition, the difficulty and rigour of securing information, the differentiation between media and the violation of journalism ethical standards are the factors that also contribute to the clash between crisis communication actors and media workers.

Some of these assumptions reverberate in our analysis of five press conferences organized by the Malaysian authorities after the disappearance of MH370. Journalists did not have many possibilities to ask questions, as the access to the floor was decided by the spokespeople of the higher rank who had the power to select the next speaker, interrupt a current speaker or agree to answer more questions (Nasharudin, Alias & Maros, 2014). Also, journalists were unable to ask any follow-up questions to verify the information or get more details, due to a very limited time allocated for questions and answers, which could have caused irritation and suspicion among journalists. Not providing journalists with enough information to report may cause them to shift the news frame from investigation to victims and re-focus the news angle on existing rumours and speculations. This was prevalent in the case of MH370 crisis, where conspiracy theories rife on the internet made way into mainstream media due to the information void and lack of enough detail from reliable sources (Dudd, 2015).

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2. Based on the text stated above, criticise **FIVE (5)** PR weaknesses that has caused much frustration especially among the international media personnel.

(15 marks)

3. If you were a foreign journalist in Kuala Lumpur assigned to cover MH370 incident, construct **TEN (10)** questions with brief justification you think should be asked at the press conference.

(20 marks)

SECTION B (50 MARKS)

MEDIA RELEASE AND FEATURE STORY

Answer **ALL** questions.

1. A Consumer Report released a testimony **of** **that** Mitsubishi Motors has used improper fuel economy testing procedures for over 25 years. This has misled Japanese regulators and consumers in various markets. Investors responded by pushing Mitsubishi shares down by 10%. The fuel test scandal has now erased half of the company's market value, and its shares are sitting at a record low.

You are to immediately issue a media release of the matter by quoting prominent people in Mitsubishi Motors, President Mr. Tetsuro Aikawa.

Your media release should have an interesting title to capture the audience's attention. The write-up should ideally be 300 - 400 words and should be written in the inverted pyramid format. Write one paragraph of boilerplate (word count does not include) and write a caption of a photograph you would include in the write-up.

(25 marks)

2. Write a feature story of **ONE (1)** of the following topics:

- i. Brain Drain – the most difficult classes (unclear connection between the two parts)
- ii. Mobile phones and student use
- iii. Student jobs – strange work stories

Your feature story should have an interesting title to capture the reader's attention. The lead must interest your readers, making them want to stay with the story to learn more.

The body must take many forms, where the inverted pyramid format is applicable and appropriate for the feature and chronological order. All facts must fit together and smoothly. Transitions are usually brief and guide the readers from one segment to the next and reveal the relationship between those segments. You are advised to develop **FIVE (5)** contents and include quotations/phrases but use of narratives where necessary.

The feature must ~~has~~ have a satisfying conclusion such as anecdotes or quotes. Avoid ending your feature with a summary.

The write-up should ideally be 300 - 400 words and should include an anecdote, quote of relevant phrase.

(25 marks)

END OF EXAM PAPER