12 Managing media sensationalism in the event of an airline disaster

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Airlines are a critical sector in the tourism industry. Progress in travel and mobility presents both opportunities and challenges to airline companies (Henderson, 2003). Airlines put a premium on the safety of travellers in their journey to and from destinations. They are meant to be prepared for potential disruptions to their operations. Airlines are, however, susceptible to certain tragic events that come without warning and bring fatal consequences (Fishman, 1999; Henderson, 2003). An airline crash is one of them. Causes of plane crashes vary from technical failure, manufacturing defects, extreme weather conditions, human error, or a combination of these. Post the September 11 World Trade Centre attacks, acts of terrorism are added to the list. Regardless of what causes a plane to crash, the unpredictability and high concentration of death and injury in a single event commonly lead to extreme grief and anger among members of the public (Gerken et al., 2016; Henderson, 2003). When a plane crashes, the host airline company encounters intense government, media and public scrutiny (Faulkner, 2001; Fishman, 1999; Henderson, 2003).

Airline crashes provide an emotionally compelling as well as highly visual and textual media story (Vincent et al., 1997 cited in Fishman, 1999). Events surrounding an airline crash provide journalists and media practitioners with various narratives and perspectives that they can choose to use in writing stories about the incident. Media stories influence organisational reputation, which is defined as "collective

representation of images of an organisation established over time"
(Cornelissen, 2011:8). In media coverage of airline crashes, framing is
a way for media practitioners to promote salient angles or storylines
about the crash (Entman, 1993). It is critical for airline management
to examine storylines about the airline crash because media reports
influence stakeholder perceptions. Media reports of a plane crash
provide audiences with "visible public expressions of approval or
disapproval of [airlines] and their actions" (Valentini & Romenti,
2011:361). Therefore, effectively managing media in news reports of an
airline crisis is crucial to an airline company to restore its reputation.
An airline's reputation influences travel decisions and thus impacts
tourism and hospitality industry as a whole.

This chapter presents a case study of a local airline in Australia
that demonstrates media framing in airline disasters. The case study
describes the role of post-crisis investigations as sources of media
stories. Findings of this case study emphasise that post-crisis investiga-
tions conducted by third-party authorities present frames (Goffman,
1974) that media use in making sense of an airline crash. Third-party
investigations, although intending to shed light on what transpired in
a crash, add complexities to crisis communication because their find-
ings are used as key narratives or storylines for media reports. Media
practitioners have direct access to investigative reports about a plane
crash. They are no longer reliant on information subsidies (Park et al.,
2016) such as press releases or media statements otherwise provided
by airline companies.

This chapter aims to examine how media reported on the Whyalla
Airlines Flight 904 crash in 2000 in South Australia. It describes how
the attribution of blame in media reports based on post-crisis investiga-
tions severely tarnished the airline's reputation, which eventually led
to its demise. It aims to extend knowledge and understanding of com-
plexities in upholding organisational reputation through managing
media representations in the event of an airline disaster. Past studies
on airline disaster response emphasise the importance of information
subsidies in framing the crash from the host airline's perspective. Post-
crisis inquiries at times override the preferred narratives of airline
companies. This is critical to note because stakeholders (especially the
media) are more inclined to uphold views of investigating authorities
even though results of investigations are sometimes questionable.

Even though Flight 904 incident is a local case, it is an important
airline disaster to examine because: it took years for government

authorities to determine the cause of the crash; a lack of proper crisis attribution led to sensationalised media reporting; and Whyalla Airlines was unable to recover from the disaster. The longer it took for post-crisis inquiries to determine the reason behind the crash, the longer the media speculated on crisis attribution. In the following sections, details of the case are presented followed by a brief discussion on relevant theoretical concepts that underpinned analysis for this case. This chapter discusses insights generated from a careful investigation of news frames from May 2000 to early 2003, the period inclusive of the airline crash until conclusion of post-crisis investigations. Practical implications for the airline industry on effective stakeholder communication at the post-crisis stage are provided.

Whyalla Airlines Flight 904 Case Study

"Adelaide, Adelaide. This is Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! Mike Zulu Kilo has experienced two engine failures. We'll be, um, landing. We're going to have to ditch. We're trying to make Whyalla at the moment… We've got no engines so we'll be ditching. We have eight POB (people on board). I repeat again eight POB, and ah, most likely we're currently, ah, about one five miles off the coast of Whyalla on the Gibon Whyalla Track. Request someone come out and help us please."

These were the last words of Ben Mackiewicz, pilot of Whyalla Airlines Flight 904, minutes before the aircraft plunged into Spencer Gulf, 10 km southeast of Whyalla, South Australia at 6:23 pm on 31 May 2000. The twin-engine commuter plane departing from Adelaide International Airport crashed into the Gulf a few minutes short of reaching its destination. All eight people on board, including the pilot, lost their lives.

Whyalla Airlines Flight 904 is considered as one of South Australia's worst air disasters. An intricate disaster rescue operation ensued that entailed collaboration among state emergency responders and volunteers who worked together for the entire duration of the rescue initiative *(Nicholson, 2001)*. It took six days before the bodies of the victims were recovered. The wreckage was located at the Yarraville Shoals, 20 meters below sea level, 30km short of its destination. Ten days after the crash, Whyalla Airlines' Air Operator's Certificate (AOC), a document that allows an airline to transport paying passengers, was suspended by the Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA). The airline eventually ceased operations for good.

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