

Strategies and Means of Presenting a Crisis Event in Modern Media

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Abstract: The article deals with an analysis of media reports covering Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 crash in 2014. Russian and American media (CNN and RT news channels) giving significantly different portrayal of the incident have been chosen for the research for the purpose of comparing strategies of communication used and analyzing language means.

The strategies of responsibility attribution (substrategy of attack), transcendence, concern, and casting the actors are relied on by CNN journalists when presenting the MH17 crash, whereas the strategies of responsibility attribution (substrategies of distance, denial and shifting the blame), transcendence, and concern are used in the RT coverage.

Keywords: Malaysia Airlines MH17, media report, crisis event, event image, communication strategy.

INTRODUCTION

Crisis communication started its development within crisis management and public relations and 'has witnessed amazing growth in both the professional and academic community over the past decade' [1: p. 21]. The initial research in crisis communication was aimed at improving the practice of public responses to an organizational crisis and most research focused on a single organization [2] and its reputation with the case study method dominating. Crisis communication theory developing, the research scope and approaches expanded beyond organizational context reaching into public [3], political [4], cultural [5], environmental [6], personal [7], and media [5, 8-9] ones.

Previous research targeting media aspects of crisis communication highlighted framing of events in media coverage [8-9] or crisis response strategies [5], whereas language means used to manifest communication strategies were not given special attention.

The present study builds on the typologies of crisis response strategies developed in Coombs' situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) focusing on attribution of responsibility and Benoit's image restoration theory (IRT) which core is image protection during a crisis. Coombs proposed the following repertoires of crisis response strategies: 1) denial, scapegoat, attack the accuser, excuse, justification, ingratiation, concern, compassion, regret, apology [1] and 2) nonexistence strategies: denial, clarification, attack, intimidation; distance strategies: excuse (denial

of intention, denial of volition), justification (minimizing injury, victim deserving, misrepresentation of the crisis event); ingratiation strategies: bolstering, transcendence, praising others; mortification strategies: remediation, repentance, rectification; suffering strategy [10]. Benoit's typology of image restoration strategies comprises denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification [4].

The methodological framework of the study was complemented by Dayan's concept of casting the actors [11] viewing media as a tool of assigning certain role categories (hero, victim, leader, etc.) to people. The idea was developed further by Elmasry *et al.* [5] as a strategy of cultural repair and expanded into two substrategies: identification and victimization.

Media provide a powerful tool and channel of crisis communication being a major source of information about events at a global scale. An event is a phenomenon of reality having its inner structure, i.e. integral features such as subject, means, object, time, conditions, reasons, purpose, and result. In fact, media present not an event itself but its image which is a result of a journalist's mental analysis of all the available features of the event and which is then transferred into words. A journalist's task is to ensure an objective and true event image. The process of event image formation and its verbal presentation is nevertheless not free of eventual deformations, both intended (e.g. author's political ideas, social stand, communicative intentions) and unintended (unavailability of full information about the event, inadequate verbal presentation, etc.) [12], which may result in different presentations of the same event by various authors. Moreover, media from different

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countries can cover the same event differently as 'media framing is also determined by the media system in the country in which the media operate' [9: p. 361].

With regard to defining the terms 'crisis event' or 'crisis', there are significant differences between scholars. Furthermore, most definitions of crisis commonly used in crisis communication seem to be organization-oriented (see e.g. overview in [13]), which is probably due to the development of crisis communication as a specialized field within public relations and organizational communication. Considering crisis communication with respect to a journalist's activity, we follow the definition of crisis by Çeşmecı *et al.* [14] which is not limited to the organizational or business approach: 'Crisis is any event that is, or expected to lead to, an unstable and dangerous situation affecting an individual, group, community, or whole society' [p. 805].

It seems to be true for the crash of Malaysia Airlines MH17, a passenger flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur that fell from the sky on 17 July 2014 over eastern Ukraine, killing all 298 people on board. The crash occurred during the military conflict between the armed forces of Ukraine and local anti-Kiev forces in eastern Ukraine but both parties denied responsibility for the incident. The crash became a major air disaster affecting not only the company of Malaysia Airlines but international community (considering the number of victims coming from around the world) and international relations as well. The tragedy received extensive media coverage, gave rise to numerous discussions and reflections among specialists and non-specialists, politicians and scientists. Scientific research dedicated to the incident highlighted, *inter alia*, linguistic, media communication, and crisis communication issues including ethical aspects of a journalist's work in the crisis environment [15], forms of unpaid digital labor in analyzing the BUK video released by the Ukrainian government on social media [16], MH17-related activities of Dutch mayors regarding crisis management [17], means of media discourse modalisation [18].

The present paper contributes to the research of the MH17 crash media coverage focusing on strategies and linguistic means of the event image presentation.

METHODS

Since the research was aimed at comparing Russian and American MH17 crash images in terms of both communication strategies and language means,

media reports written in the same language were required for convenience of the analysis. Thus, RT as a Russian international network providing content in several languages, including English, and CNN as an American news channel were selected for the study. Media reports covering the MH17 crash on the day of the incident and the day following it (July 17-18, 2014) released on the website of RT (the English-language version) and that of CNN were used as data for the study. The search terms 'Malaysia Airlines MH17' allowed selecting reports dealing with the MH17 crash written during the two-day stretch of coverage. In all, 16 RT reports and 17 CNN reports (a full list is provided in the Appendix) were studied using the methods of content and comparative analysis. The news articles under analysis were coded according to the crisis response strategies developed in SCCT and IRT as well as the strategy of casting the actors. Then, the strategies found to be used in the RT and CNN coverage were compared in terms of their language manifestation.

RESULTS

The study has found three main strategies used in presenting the MH17 crash image in both Russian and American news outlets – responsibility attribution, transcendence, concern – and a strategy explicated in the CNN reports – casting the actors. Though the former three strategies are common for the two news channels, they are used differently in the RT and CNN reports through the word choice, reflection of different aspects of the event, and presentation of contrasting (sometimes contrary) views of the incident.

Responsibility Attribution

Responsibility attribution is the predominant strategy in covering the MH17 crash. CNN journalists in this respect resort to the substrategy of attack attributing crisis responsibility to Russia through accusations of the anti-Kiev opposition forces labeling them 'pro-Russian' or 'Russian-backed': *President Barack Obama said Friday that Russian President Vladimir Putin has the "most control" over the situation in eastern Ukraine as intelligence indicates that rebels most likely shot down Flight 17 from an area they control with a surface-to-air missile ... Obama said the rebels' sophisticated weaponry and training needed to shoot down aircraft "is coming from Russia" ...* [19]. Russia is associated with the tragedy also through mentioning it in descriptions of the crash site: *Video footage from the site, located about 30 miles from the*

Russian border, showed smoke billowing from the smoldering wreckage long after the crash [20]; The plane is said to have crashed in eastern Ukraine near the border with Russia [21].

The attacked image of Russia is defended in the RT reports based on the substrategies of distance, denial of involvement in the Ukraine conflict and shifting the blame to the third party: *The Russian Defense Ministry has said that neither the Buk missile defense system, nor any other military equipment, has crossed the Russian border into Ukraine [22]; Ukraine should bear responsibility for Malaysian airliner tragedy, said the head of the Russian state ... [23].*

Regarding responsibility issue, the problem of nomination should be considered. The Russian and American media designate the integral features of the crash event applying different terms being a tool of public opinion creation and manipulation. Thus, CNN uses the names 'separatists', 'pro-Russia(n) separatists', 'Russian-backed separatists', 'militants', 'pro-Russian militants', 'rebels', 'rebel fighters', 'pro-Russian fighters' for the group of people opposing the official Ukrainian authorities, while 'militias', 'Ukrainian militias', 'anti-Kiev militias', 'anti-government militias', 'anti-Kiev fighters', 'self-defense forces', 'opposition forces' are typical of the RT reports.

The event itself is described in different ways as well: CNN refers to it using the nouns 'crash', 'tragedy', 'disaster', 'downing', 'shooting down' and the verbs and verbal phrases 'crashed', 'was shot down', 'rebels most likely shot down Flight 17', 'it is most likely that pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine fired the missile that downed Malaysia Airlines Flight 17'. The RT reports employ the nouns 'crash', 'incident', 'tragedy', 'disaster', 'apparent shooting-down' and verbs and expressions 'crashed', 'was apparently shot down', 'it is believed that it may have been shot down'.

The nomination problem seems to be politically loaded and in the American media presupposes Russian involvement in the Ukrainian conflict, which is not the case in the Russian media word choice. In addition, the RT reports present the MH17 crash as shooting down using modal modifiers of uncertainty (*apparent, apparently, it is believed, may + perfect infinitive*), whereas the CNN reports express it in assertive form or with epistemic modal markers of strong probability (*most likely*), which is an intensifying factor of responsibility attribution as it creates social perception of the event controllability.

Transcendence

Transcendence is placing a crisis event in a broader context aimed at creating a desired crisis perception by the community. Content analysis of the CNN reports has found presenting the MH17 crash in the context of the following issues: the Ukraine conflict [24-25], closing the airspace over eastern Ukraine [25], Malaysia Airlines troubles [21, 25], Russia-world relations [26], MH17 crash investigation concerns [25, 27], human tragedy [20, 25, 28-30], blame game [19, 31-34].

RT covers the MH17 incident in contextual relationship with the topics of rerouting international flights to avoid eastern Ukrainian airspace [41], incidents involving the plane model Boeing-777 [42], MH17 flight path [43], MH17 crash investigation concerns [44-46], human tragedy [41-42], blame game [22, 43-45].

Concern

Both news channels expressed concern for the victims of the tragedy releasing stories of the people on board [28-30, 41-42] and providing links to foundations for donating and help lines offering support to those left behind [30].

Casting the Actors

The CNN reports are found to contribute to social perception of Russia as an aggressor: *"These separatist leaders are taking orders from Russia and (Russian President Vladimir Putin) has to realize the consequence of sending heavy and sophisticated weapons to a gang of sociopaths, extremists, violent thugs, nationalists and agents who are just given weapons and told to make chaos," the official said ... Putin and the Russian government "have to make a strategic decision," Obama said on Friday. "Are they going to continue to support violent separatists whose intent is to undermine the government of Ukraine? ..."* ... *"If he [Putin] ever had an intention of backing off, this could be an opportunity for him to do that," another U.S. official said. "I don't think he does have that intention, though" ... "This is very likely to harden views that Russia is not a problem," one official said. "If there were any Europeans who believe it had nothing to do with them, that Ukraine was merely a local issue, that will change" [26].*

This strategy is obviously strongly related to responsibility attribution that seems to be subordinate

to the former. Both strategies serve to present Russia as a threat and are implemented alongside.

DISCUSSION

The research has found that in the MH17 crash coverage, CNN and RT share the communication strategies of responsibility attribution, transcendence and concern but still present different images of the event. The differences result from the selectiveness of the event aspects to be covered, political stand of the journalist staff, word choice to designate the crash event and the group of people confronting the Ukrainian government, and the use of different substrategies of responsibility attribution: CNN resorts to attack, whereas RT relies on distance, denial and shifting the blame.

Moreover, CNN practices one more strategy, namely casting the actors, assigning Russia an aggressor role. Generally speaking, the MH17 coverage seems to be guided by creation of a desired social perception of the event and the parties involved.

The findings of the present study contribute to the research of crisis event presentation in media coverage as dependent on national media system and are of significance for crisis communication theory and practice due to the attempt of considering communication strategies in correlation with language means.

APPENDIX

Analyzed RT Reports

1. Double grief: Australian family loses loved ones in both Malaysian plane tragedies [accessed 2017 Jan 22]: Available from: <https://www.rt.com/news/173892-australia-family-malaysia-ukraine/>
2. Flights rerouted: Planes avoiding Ukraine airspace after Malaysia Airlines crash plane' [accessed 2017 Jan 22]: Available from: <https://www.rt.com/news/173652-fights-avoid-ukrain-malaysia/>
3. Gruesome images of Malaysia MH17 plane crash in east Ukraine appear online [accessed 2017 Jan 22]: Available from: <https://www.rt.com/news/173644-photos-plane-malaysia-crash/>
4. Lavrov: Russia won't take control of Malaysian plane's black boxes [accessed 2017 Jan 22]: Available from: <https://www.rt.com/news/173820-ukraine-plane-black-boxes/>
5. Malaysia Airlines MH17 crash caught on film (VIDEO) [accessed 2017 Jan 22]: Available from: <https://www.rt.com/news/173692-malaysian-plane-crash-video/>
6. Malaysia Airlines MH17 plane crash in Ukraine Live updates [accessed 2017 Jan 22]: Available from: <https://www.rt.com/news/173628-malaysian-plane-crash-ukraine/>
7. Malaysian airliner crashes in E. Ukraine near Russian border, 298 people on board [accessed 2017 Jan 22]: Available from: <https://www.rt.com/news/173616-malaysian-crash-ukraine-border/>
8. Moscow calls for intl probe into Malaysia MH17 flight crash – Russia's UN envoy [accessed 2017 Jan 22]: Available from: <https://www.rt.com/news/173972-churkin-malaysia-plane-un/>
9. Moscow: No Buk missile systems or other weapons crossed Russia-Ukraine border [accessed 2017 Jan 22]: Available from: <https://www.rt.com/news/173932-no-weapons-cross-russia-border/>
10. Putin: Thorough investigation of Malaysian airliner tragedy in Ukraine required [accessed 2017 Jan 22]: Available from: <https://www.rt.com/news/173744-putin-ukraine-plane-russia/>
11. Questions over why Malaysian plane flew over Ukrainian warzone [accessed 2017 Jan 22]: Available from: <https://www.rt.com/news/173792-malaysian-plane-diverted-warzone/>
12. Reports that Putin flew similar route as MH17, presidential airport says 'hasn't overflowed Ukraine for long time' [accessed 2017 Jan 22]: Available from: <https://www.rt.com/news/173672-malaysia-plane-crash-putin/>
13. 'Somebody watching over us': British family cheats death on flight MH17 [accessed 2017 Jan 22]: Available from: <https://www.rt.com/uk/173864-british-mh17-flight-saved/>
14. Ukrainian Buk battery radar was operational when Malaysian plane downed – Moscow [accessed 2017 Jan 22]: Available from: <https://www.rt.com/news/173784-ukraine-plane-malaysian-russia/>

15. Unverified tape released by Kiev presented as 'proof' E. Ukraine militia downed MH17 [accessed 2017 Jan 22]: Available from: <https://www.rt.com/news/173964-ukraine-malaysia-intercepted-calls/>
16. US confident surface-to-air missile brought down MH17 – Obama [accessed 2017 Jan 22]: Available from: <https://www.rt.com/usa/173920-obama-ukraine-situation-statement/>
8. Ellis R, Pearson M, Smith-Spark L. Monitors find confusion, hostility at Malaysia Airlines crash site [accessed 2017 Feb 15]: Available from: <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/07/18/world/europe/ukraine-malaysia-airlines-crash/index.html>
9. Jones B. MH17: Grief and mourning at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport [accessed 2017 Feb 15]: Available from: <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/07/18/world/europe/mh17-grief-mourning-schiphol-amsterdam-airport/index.html>

Analyzed CNN Reports

1. Almsy S. Malaysia Airlines Flight 17: Where does the investigation go from here? [accessed 2017 Feb 15]: Available from: <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/07/18/world/europe/mh17-investigation/index.html>
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