

Health Crisis Reporting in the Internet Age: The Relevance of Malaysian Newspapers

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Abstract. We live in a world that has become radically interconnected, interdependent and communicated in the flows of information and culture. In recent times, global crises have continued to threaten human survival. Every country experiences crisis now and then, and Malaysia is no exception. The collective recognition and response to these different threats to humanity depends in large measure on how they become defined and constructed by the news media, and goes a long way to reflect the general competency of a government in handling crises. This study probes into how two Malaysian English language newspapers (New Straits Times and the Star) reported health crisis that the country experienced in 2009, the extent to which they undertook a balanced and responsible reporting. One of the findings of the study is that the two newspapers appeared to have provided adequate coverage of the crisis. Again the greatest constraint to crisis reporting in the country is lack of freedom to get information as well as newspaper ownership pattern.

Keywords: Health, Crisis, reporting, Malaysia, newspapers, New Strait Times, the Star, internet age.

1. Introduction

Images of global crisis are a routine, everyday feature of our news media. From the morning newspaper's depiction of the tragedies of war in Libya, Egypt, and Syria, to online news report on financial crisis in the United States and Europe, to the newscast's coverage of global warming, these images have a profound impact on our perceptions of human condition. It should be noted however that crisis can occur in various forms, such as environmental, economic, political, health, terrorism among others, but this paper is focusing on health crisis.

Crisis has often been used interchangeably with catastrophe, calamity, or disaster with no attempt to delineate the severity or scope of a problem. Guth (1995) ultimately may be correct in implying that the concept of "crisis" is an ambiguous "term of art" that differs widely based upon the severity of a problem. But the concept requires some concrete parameters if the term is to exist as a meaningful unit of analysis. Barton (1993) has defined a "crisis" as a situation characterized by (1) surprise (2) a high threat to important values and (3) a short decision time. Fink (1986) defines a crisis as an "unstable time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending--either one with the distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome or one with the distinct possibility of a highly desirable and extremely positive outcome. It is the most significant test of any government or organization hit by it, and by their very nature, crises are unpredictable and varied. This in essence means that they may occur on a personal or societal level. It may be a traumatic or stressful change in a person's life, or an unstable and dangerous social situation, in political, social, economic, military affairs, or a large-scale environmental event, especially one involving human and economic loss.

However, crisis management researchers Pauchant and Mitroff (1992) tend to differentiate crisis from such concepts as accidents, incidents and conflict. They define a crisis as "a physical disruption that affects a whole system and threatens its basic assumptions and existential core". Their definition of crisis, as it relates

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to a system as a company or organization, requires two conditions. First, the whole system or organization must be affected or physically disturbed in its entirety. Second, the basic assumptions of members of that system need to be challenged to the point where they are forced either to realize the faulty foundation of these assumptions or develop defense mechanisms against these assumptions. They point out that the second symbolic or social level condition is the most “poignant manifestation” of a crisis. They present a clear distinction between the concept of crisis and incident. A crisis must disrupt the whole system or organization and challenge the basic assumptions of the members of the system. An event is not a crisis if it only affects a self contained part of a system or organization. It is an incident.

In 2009, Malaysia experienced health crisis in condition of the dreaded bird flu – influenza A (H1N1) and dengue fever. The situation was critical that the government did everything it could to contain the crisis. This could not have been achieved without the instrument of the media. For Malaysian journalists, confronted with the challenge of bearing witness to horrors, threats and risks on behalf of the public, the effort to document their human consequences is simultaneously one of interpretation, of assigning appropriate meaning and relevance. The representation of disturbing events, in other words, is partly constitutive of their reality. Important questions thus arise regarding the exercise of communicative power and influence, in particular the pivotal role of the news media in identifying, defining and framing certain situations as crises of national significance demanding concerted action.

2. Health crisis reporting in the star and New Straits Times newspapers.

The framework for this study is media dependency theory. This theory helps to portray the role of newspapers during health crisis. This is because during crisis, accurate and appropriate information are required in order to allay fears from the public. More important is the way and manner in which this information is communicated to the public. It should be noted that during crisis, the credibility of the government is suspect among audiences directly and indirectly affected by it. So in communicating the crisis, the role of the press must be understood, particularly since journalists would go out to seek for information.

Media dependency theory stipulates that the public resorts to the mass media in the search for knowledge and behavioural adjustment (De Fleur & Rokeach, 1989). It tries to prove the fact that people depend on the media archives for certain information at different levels and this to a large extent determines the amount of time and concentration they give to such media organization. So, it would be good to know how much the Malaysian audience depend on the media, and also what type of media (radio, television, newspapers etc). Again, this narrows down to the fact that the ability of the Malaysian press to report objectively and draw large audience depends largely on their editorial policy. If their editorial policies are such that serve as the mouthpiece of the government, they are bound to lose the confidence the audience repose in them. Doris Graber (1993) in her word stated:

“The public becomes almost totally dependent on the media for news that may be vital for survival and for important messages from public and private authorities. The mass media are the only institution with the capacity to collect this escalating mass of information and disseminate it quickly. When people become aware of the crisis, they therefore turn on their radio or television sets often on a round-the-clock basis, to monitor the event.”

However, the contemporary Malaysian society requires the press to not only report the truth, but also to report the fact about the truth. This requirement demands that the press be accurate and objective; it must not lie. It means also, that *the Star* and *New Straits Times* newspapers must identify fact as fact and opinion as opinion, and also tell the whole truth about the crisis. Again, the Malaysian public expects the press to serve as a forum for the exchange of comments and criticisms about the crisis. This means that they should regard themselves as common carriers of public discussions. Health Crisis reporters in the country are expected to represent all-important viewpoints, not merely those with which the publisher or operator agrees. In doing so, they should carefully identify all sources of news regarding the crisis in order to present to the public with story of the real situation.

As we are aware, the modern media has the most enormous influence in the way it shapes public’s perception and understanding of events. The newspapers, television, radio and most recently, the Internet, all

vie to give the public as much information on events as quickly as is possible. So one may readily question the relevance of Malaysian newspapers in reporting health crisis, and how they fit in to the changing nature of the modern media itself. Many social scientists and scholars today agree that the existence of crisis and conflict itself is an inevitable part of human interaction. The question is not how to prevent it, but rather how to deal with it in such a way as to produce the most positive and least violent outcomes possible for all the parties concerned. Besides, the activities of bloggers and citizen journalists in the country seem to threaten the mainstream media. There is a general perception by the public that the mainstream media have failed to present the public with accurate and truthful information, hence many citizens look up to the alternative media for information.

Therefore, this research paper aims at determining the rate at which Malaysian newspapers (*New Straits Times* and the *Star*) reported the 2009 health crisis. It equally sets out to find whether the newspapers played the social role in keeping the Malaysian public informed of the developments in the crisis, and finally, identifying barriers to effective health crisis reporting in the country.

3. Findings

Table 1: Rate of Health Crisis reporting in the two newspapers during the period

2009	The Star	New Straits Times
Total	222	121

Table 2: Sample of stories from the Star

S/n	Headline	Page	Types of news	Location	Byline	Date
1.	108 dengue deaths last year.	31	Article	KL	<i>The star</i>	03/01/2009
2.	DBKL to step up war on dengue	2	News	KL	Bavani M	04/02/2009
3.	Govt.: Avoid going to flu-hit areas	6	News	KL	<i>The Star</i>	28/04/2009
4.	38 now in hospital.	4	News	Miri	<i>The Star</i>	13/05/2009
5.	569 new A (H1N1) infections	14	News	KL	Lester Kong	21/08/2009

Table 3: Sample of news stories from New Straits Times

S/N	Headline	Pg. no	News Ctg.	Location	Byline	Date
1	Flu in from the US: student is country's first case.	4	News	KL	Kristina George	16/05/2009
2	Victim no.2, 21 yr old woman is 2nd confirmed case...	6,7,20	News	KL	Farah Naz Karim	17/05/2009
3	Scramble to contain first locally transmitted H1N1 case	12, 13	News	KL	F.N. Karim	18/06/2009
4	Liow briefs MP's about flu fight.	11	News	KL	Shuhada Ellis	03/07/2009
5	Don't sensationalize H1N1 stories . (MMA President	12, 13	News	KL	NST	11/07/2009

The data for this study was generated through content analysis research approach. This becomes important in view of the fact that the research is set to find out the rate at which the two newspapers report crisis, and whether the Malaysian publics were well informed of the developments. In this wise, the content of the two newspapers were analyzed from January to December 2009. This means that every edition of the newspapers was considered, and all the pages were looked into so as to find out whether they contain crisis stories. Again, all the categories of news were put into consideration, such as news, comments, opinions,

letters and advertorials. This is to ensure that all the health crisis reports in the newspapers were counted. The rationale for the choice of the period is because Malaysia witnessed series of health crisis, ranging from dengue fever to bird flu - influenza A (H1N1) during the time.

4. Discussion of findings

Table 1 shows the rate at which the two newspapers reported health crisis in the country within the period under study while table 2 and table 3 show samples of the stories reported by *the Star* and *New Straits Times* respectively. They depict the widespread cases of bird flu – influenza A (H1N1) and dengue fever in the country in the year. From the analysis of the content of the two newspapers, it could be observed that a total number of 343 news reports on the crisis were reported, 222 for *the Star* and 121 for the *New Straits Times*.

The *Star* edition of 3rd January 2009 page 31 reported that there were 108 dengue deaths in the country in 2008. Subsequently, on 24th January 2009 page 27, the paper reported the rise in dengue cases in Perak state under the headline “Dengue cases on the rise in Perak”. Also, in its headline on 31st January 2009 page 7, the paper reported “45 cases of dengue in Setapak.” The report continued in February as various states in the country stepped up efforts in the fight against this disease.

Furthermore, on 4th February 2009, the paper reported in its headline on page 2 that “DBKL to step up war on dengue”. The first paragraph of the news reads, “The Health Ministry has declared war on dengue and the Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) is going all out to do battle against *Aedes mosquito* following an alarming rise in the number of cases and related deaths in the city since January.”

The same applies to the bird flu which prevailed heavily in the country from April to August 2009. On 13th May, it was reported that 38 people were admitted to hospital as a result of the bird flu and the headline reads “38 now in hospital”. It should be noted that the country recorded its first bird flu related death on July 20th when an Indonesian student died of complications. This was reported on page 6 of the *New Straits Times* of 24th July 2009. After this incident, the flu started to spread faster than envisaged and four days later (28th July 2009) the paper reported the second death. By August 16th 2009, the death toll has reached 59 with 1,983 confirmed cases and a prediction by the Minister of Health that about 140,000 Malaysians are suspected to have been infected with the virus.

Subsequently, *New Straits Times*, August 11, 2009 edition reported that there were 32 deaths out of 1,983 confirmed cases of the epidemic in the country. Again, the next day August 12, 2009, it was reported that the total number of confirmed cases in the country rose to 2,253 with 38 deaths. The paper equally has several touching headlines describing the rate at which the disease was spreading across the country. Typical examples are 17th May 2009 and 7th June 2009 where the paper had these headlines “Victim no.2, 21 yr old woman is 2nd confirmed case of influenza A (H1N1)” and “Aussie is 7th A(H1N1) victim” respectively.

The difference in the reports in the two newspapers stems from the fact that between January and April 2009, the *New Straits Times* did not report much on health crisis, but rather paid more attention to the political crisis in Perak State parliament. It was not until May when it had 14 reports on the dengue and influenza A (H1N1). But *the Star* on the other hand was consistent in reporting the crisis right from January 2009 by telling the Malaysian public on its 3rd of January edition that 108 people died as a result of dengue fever in 2008. A critical observation will attest to the fact that the paper progressed from reporting dengue menace to the bird flu crisis.

However, it is imperative to note the various measures taken by the Malaysian government to contain the crisis. Such include quarantining of the victims, social distancing to stop the spread, thorough screening at airports for visitors and those coming back from overseas and closure of schools to prevent students from contracting the disease. On June 13th edition of *New Straits Times newspaper*, reporters Farah Naz Karim and Lydia Gomez wrote under the headline “Nipping it in the bud” how the government directed closure of schools, cancelling public gatherings and its readiness to use social distancing measures to contain any local transmission of the disease, A (H1N1). Three days earlier (10th June), the Director General of the Ministry of Health, Tan Sri Dr. Haji Mohd Ismail Merican had advised Malaysians in overseas to seek treatment before

coming home, particularly when they suspect they are having fever. Also in a related development, the Minister of Health, Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai directed that dengue patients should be kept in a special ward (*New Straits Times* 17th June 2009).

5. Constraints to health crisis reporting in Malaysia

A free press that acts as a check and balance on both individuals and institutions—government, the legislature, the judiciary, business, the civil service, the police force, NGOs and so on—plays a crucial role in building a just and democratic society. By calling for transparency and accountability, the press reinforces good governance and helps to ensure that there is no place for corruption and abuse. Besides, a free press is important because it is inextricably linked to freedoms of speech and expression.

Press freedom needs to be buttressed by the right to information. In Malaysia, getting the information is often a tedious affair and can be downright frustrating not just for crisis reporting journalists but also for the man in the street because there are no Freedom of Information (FOI) laws. Since the mid-1970s, there have been calls for FOI laws. For instance, DAP Member of Parliament Lim Kit Siang tried, unsuccessfully, to move a Private Member's Bill on Freedom of Information (FOI) in 1976. Ten years later, a public campaign against amendments to the Official Secrets Act took place. And since Suhakam was set up in 1999, several groups, including journalists, have called for the right to information. The 2010 World freedom of the press ranking placed Malaysia at 141 out of 196 countries. This is in view of the level of freedom granted to the press in the country.

Apart from the above, there are also certain factors which usually condition the press in the performance of its functions. These include the prevailing political system, the level independence enjoyed by the press, the ownership structure, and the level of professional education and training of journalists. Of importance also is the nature of the audience, the relevance of the event in relation to the interest of the audience, the time of the occurrence of the event, and the status of the particular medium in relation to other media which competes with it for attention of the audience. These factors could operate in various combinations to shape the coverage of various kinds of crises at various times.

According to Anup Shah (2009), the ownership interests in Malaysia may affect what is and is not covered on the story. Stories can end up being biased or omitted so as not to offend advertisers or owners. The ability of citizens to make informed decisions is crucial for a free and functioning democracy but currently this becomes threatened by such concentration in ownership.

6. Conclusion

Crisis is not often what actually has happened, but what people – communities, nations and governments, think have happened. It is therefore vital for messages – in what is reported and commented, to include not only what the journalist thinks should be included, but also what others expect him to include. It is critical therefore, to understand the experience and situation on the other side of the fence – a nation in crisis – distraught and frightened. What is not reported is just as important as what is reported.

In the chaotic nature of crisis, journalists in Malaysia need necessarily know what is expected of the profession. So, providing information that is timely and relevant is very important as well as how, why and when to provide the information. This is in view of the fact that in any crisis, information is sought as it has utility (Information Utility Theory), and seeking for information is hastened during crisis. Newspapers in the country have the unique capacity of transmitting enormous amounts of information over long distances and are very responsive to cultural changes. They have over the centuries afforded consumers longevity, durability, historical evidence, and opportunity for record keeping and referencing. In this wise, they are still relevant in reporting crisis in Malaysia

From this study, it could be understood that the two newspapers (*the Star* and *News Straits Times*) have played significant roles throughout the period of the health crisis in Malaysia in 2009, by promoting stability, and keeping citizens informed. Through detailed account, the two newspapers appeared to have interpreted

the crisis for better understanding, and this had enormous influence on people's attitudes towards the situation. Newspapers remain the main important reading informative document for the people to rely on.

7. References

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