Strategic crisis communication: navigating digital complexity in aviation case study

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Abstract The complexity of crisis communication in the digital era has increased alongside the rapid development of internet technology and social media. This situation has made companies more vulnerable to crises that can significantly impact their reputation and operations. Thus, this study seeks to answer the research question: how can a well-structured and planned issue management strategy help organisations anticipate and address crises in the digital era? This research employed a qualitative approach with an exploratory design to answer this question. In-depth interviews were conducted with senior corporate communication executives and crisis managers from high-reliability organisations (HROs). HROs were selected as the research subjects due to their high-risk operations, which demand highly structured and strategic risk and issue management systems. The findings indicate that proactive issue management strategies based on risk analysis are crucial in mitigating the impact of crises. Furthermore, the results emphasise the importance of integrating digital technologies into communication strategies to enhance the effectiveness of issues and crisis management. This study aims to provide practical recommendations for Public Relations practitioners and offer directions for further research on issue and crisis management in the digital era.

Keywords: aviation industries; crisis communication; issue management strategy; public relations

INTRODUCTION

The study of crisis communication has continually evolved and is influenced by the development of media as an integral component. As we enter the fourth industrial revolution, the internet is no longer the sole media that has transformed crisis communication. This media evolution has driven public relations (PR) practitioners who manage crisis communication to innovate and remain relevant. The advancement of information technology has dramatically altered how PR distributes information, interacts with key publics, addresses crises, and manages issues (Lindic, 2006). In particular, crisis communication has become increasingly complex, making companies more vulnerable to significant crises (W. T. Coombs & Holladay, 2018). Alfonso & Suzanne (2008) also pointed out that the internet serves as a new medium in crises and can trigger new crises.

Numerous companies have suffered significant losses due to crises initiated online. For instance, United Airlines faced a crisis after a passenger expressed dissatisfaction on YouTube (Kompas.com, 2017). The company's failure to identify the potential crisis and adapt to digital developments delayed its response, resulting in the broader crisis and a tarnished reputation. This event has been labelled one of the worst Public Relations disasters in history.

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Mahon & Waddock (1992) emphasises that the first step in issue management is analysis—understanding what could happen to the company or industry and how management can address it. Issue management is a strategic discipline closely linked to crisis management and communication, as the success of both depends on effective issue management.

In the face of the complexities and uncertainties of the information age, companies must develop effective issue management strategies. This study examines the changes in crisis communication activities, particularly issue management, driven by the internet. It highlights the importance of designing issue management strategies tailored to the digital age.

This research aimed to explore the issue management strategies employed by professional PR practitioners in managing crises in the digital era. Additionally, this study seeks to provide a reference for communication researchers regarding the use of computational methods, which are typically more common in computer science and information technology research. From a communication perspective, the data can be critically and deeply analysed using crisis management and communication frameworks.

The findings are expected to benefit academics and researchers, particularly in the fields of digital Public Relations and communication studies by encouraging further exploration of the relevance of digital media to PR activities, especially issue management. Moreover, the research offers practical recommendations for PR practitioners to implement effective issue management strategies, ensuring successful crisis management and communication in the digital era.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research method to explore strategic issue management in anticipating the complexity of digital crises, focusing on a case study of an airline company (Taylor et al., 2016). The airline industry was chosen as it represents a high-risk operational environment where digital crises can significantly impact reputation and operational continuity.

In this qualitative descriptive research, data collection was conducted through observation and in-depth interviews. The researchers successfully interviewed two key informants from an airline company: I.N.A., the Emergency Response Plan Manager, and D.I., a Communication Analyst. These informants were selected based on their expertise and active involvement in formulating crisis management and communication strategies, including issue management activities. Structured interviews were conducted using a pre-prepared set of questions to ensure that the information obtained was organised, focused, and aligned with the research objectives. As stated by Bhalla et al., (2023), 'Structured interviews are interviews conducted using a pre-prepared list of questions'. This approach allowed researchers to gather comprehensive insights into issue and crisis management processes from senior corporate communication executives and crisis managers. To provide a clearer background on the informants, the following table summarises their roles and responsibilities at Table 1.

Table 1. Informant List Background

Informant	Position	Role in Crisis Management
I.N.A.	Emergency Response Plan Manager	Oversees emergency response strategies and risk mitigation plans
D.I.	Communication Analyst	Develops and implements crisis communication strategies

Source: Author (2024)

In addition to primary data from interviews, secondary data were collected from internal reports, public documents, and relevant publications to provide additional context and support for the analysis (Creswell, 2013). The data were transcribed, categorised, and analysed descriptively to uncover patterns, strategies, and insights into how the airline company anticipates and manages digital crises.

This methodological approach aims to provide practical recommendations for Public Relations practitioners in the airline industry and contribute to a broader understanding of issue and crisis management in high-risk sectors during the digital era (Silalahi, 2009).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Crisis Handle on PR Teams

This study aims to determine the issue management strategy carried out by professional PR practitioners in dealing with crises in today's digital age. In addition, this study also aims to

provide references to researchers in the field of communication in relation to the use of computational methods that are usually more popular in research in the fields of computer science and information technology. From the perspective of the field of communication, the data produced can also be analysed critically and in depth using crisis management and communication studies that the author has explored.

The results of this study are expected to be useful for academics/researchers, especially in the field of digital Public Relations and communication sciences in general, so that they can conduct more studies on the relevance of digital media to Public Relations activities, one of which is issue management activities. This study can be a recommendation for practitioners, especially in the field of Public Relations, to be able to implement a good issue management strategy design in order to achieve successful crisis management and communication activities in the digital era.

On this occasion, the researcher is interested in examining how issue management strategies are applied in the digital era by Public Relations in organisations that are included in the HRO type through qualitative descriptive analysis. One of the reasons why the researchers are interested in studying this case is the insufficient studies in the field of crisis communication that emphasise the issue management process despite that this stage is deemed to be very important to determine whether a company is vulnerable to a crisis. If the issue management is effective, the crisis that might occur will automatically be prevented. Especially in today's digital age, there must be a change in the issue management strategy implemented by companies, considering the very rapid development of technology, of course, using old strategies may not be efficient to be reimplemented. Therefore, this study probed on how PR in companies formulate their issue management strategies following digital developments, whether they have done it or not, and how and to what extent the digital adaptation process has been carried out.

From the observations that have been made, it can be seen that the issue management activities carried out by the airline company have been quite effective, especially in the planning phase. However, the implementation process still appears to have shortcomings, as several past cases affecting the airline company were not managed optimally. Why did the researcher assume that the airline company's issue management activities were good? This is because the researcher found that the airline company has a specific formula for crisis management called the emergency response plan. Additionally, as a high-reliability organization (HRO), the airline company acknowledges the importance of risk analysis by maintaining a dedicated risk management division. Case studies, if thoughtfully conceived and well executed, are a research tool well-suited to the study of public relations (Cutler, 2004).

Risk is almost the same as an issue, it is one of the important aspects in crisis communication where risks that cannot be resolved properly will continue to become a crisis that is considered more dangerous to the company's existence. Therefore, studying risk properly is one of the initial steps in avoiding a crisis hitting the company. Risk is often said to be a threat where it is a potential that is dangerous and can potentially cause losses to the company. A crisis can occur if the risk is ignored, appreciated, or given special attention. Effective risk management can prevent a crisis from occurring, where the crisis team plays a role in assessing and analysing risks promptly so that negative impacts can be reduced, especially before they can develop into a crisis (W. T. Coombs & Holladay, 2018).

Seeing risk as one of the important aspects of crisis management besides issue management, therefore, an airline company annually updates its risk by looking at developments in the external environment, such as financial factors and business competitors; even technology continues to follow its business journey. Airline Company has a special division to manage risk called Enterprise Risk Management which is under the leadership of the Director of Finance and Risk Management.

Before discussing the company's issue management strategies, it is crucial to understand how Public Relations (PR) professionals perceive crises in the digital era. A PR professional's perspective on crises directly influences their approach to issue and crisis management.

Based on interviews with the airline Public Relations team, several key themes emerged regarding public perception and crisis management in the airline industry. One of the most significant findings is the increased public awareness and expectations. The advancement of society's critical thinking and their active involvement in social media significantly impact how crises are perceived and addressed. As stated by the PR representative: *"People are now more*

critical and knowledgeable about companies, particularly through social media. This leads to higher public expectations, especially for a five-star airline.... Any mistake, no matter how small, can trigger widespread criticism on social media." This aligns with the Expectation Management Theory (Grunig, 2008; Grunig & Hunt, 1984), which emphasises that stakeholders' expectations and perceptions shape organisational reputation. The higher the expectations, the greater the potential backlash when those expectations are unmet.

Another key theme is the dual impact of social media. Social media serves as both an opportunity and a challenge for the company. On the positive side, the PR representative highlighted the role of unpaid social media volunteers who amplify the company's achievements. Conversely, social media also magnifies public criticism, as users act as 'citizen journalists' with the power to disseminate negative opinions widely. This dual role of social media reflects the concept of Media Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976), where people's reliance on social media for information shapes how crises are amplified or mitigated. In the case of an airline company, this dependency creates both opportunities for positive engagement and vulnerabilities to reputational risks.

Additionally, this research highlights a heightened sensitivity among customers regarding service disruptions. The PR team noted that customers have higher tolerance levels for competitors' delays but are less forgiving when similar disruptions occur with airline companies. For example, a one-hour delay by an airline company often generates significant backlash compared to longer delays by other airlines. This finding is consistent with the Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1986), which posits that stakeholders assign blame and responsibility based on their perception of an organisation's capabilities and status. As a five-star airline and a national flag carrier, an airline company is held to higher standards, intensifying the scrutiny during service disruptions.

The research highlights the importance of proactive and strategic issue management that considers the public's heightened expectations, social media's dual nature, and the reputational risks posed by service disruptions. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of crisis communication in the digital era and underscore the necessity for adaptive strategies in high-stakes industries like aviation.

Based on the interviews, airline companies' Public Relations (PR) perspectives highlight that crises in the digital era have become significantly more complex. This complexity is influenced by the rapid advancement of technology, heightened public intelligence, and the widespread use of social media, which allows information to spread quickly and amplifies public scrutiny.

The PR professionals emphasised that the aviation business is inherently complex due to its multifaceted operations involving safety, security, and service. This complexity is further exacerbated by technological advancements and the increasing expectations of the public. For example, delays in flights, which are often caused by safety considerations, can quickly escalate into crises when not effectively managed. This observation aligns with the Systems Theory (Luhmann, 1995)(Schwanitz, 1995), which views organisations as interconnected systems where disruptions in one component can ripple across the entire system. The interplay of operational, commercial, and safety factors in the aviation industry creates a higher risk of crises, particularly in the digital era.

Crisis Handle on Social Media

Social media has transformed how crises unfold and are perceived. Airline PR professionals highlighted how platforms enable the public to act as 'citizen journalists', rapidly sharing opinions and criticisms. This amplification effect increases the pressure on companies to respond swiftly and effectively. The findings are consistent with the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (W. T. Coombs, 2007), which emphasises the need for organisations to adapt their communication strategies based on public perception and the evolving nature of the crisis. In the digital era, the speed and reach of social media require real-time monitoring and proactive engagement to manage crises effectively.

Beyond technological and operational challenges, the airline industry faces intense competition. PR professionals noted the need to continuously adapt through strategies such as travel fairs, advertising, and the opening of new routes. These commercial pressures, coupled with digital developments, add layers of complexity to issue and crisis management. This aligns

with the Resource Dependency Theory (Hillman et al., 2009), which posits that organisations must strategically manage external dependencies and uncertainties to maintain stability and competitiveness.

The study underscores the need for airline companies to adopt a holistic and adaptive approach to issue and crisis management. Integrating operational resilience, proactive communication, and strategic adaptation is critical in navigating the complexities of the digital era.

Indeed, what is faced by PR practitioners has now undergone changes whereas mentioned earlier that the web era 4.0 supports the openness and full participation of the community. All forms of opinion can be conveyed or written freely through the new media so that it will demand more PR practitioners to monitor regularly and examine more in public opinion that is spread in it. Kim & Liu (2012) found that social media was more frequently used than the traditional one in the organisational crisis management

Information technology has dramatically changed how homework is done in distributing information, interacting with the critical public, dealing with crises, and issue management (Lindic, 2006). In turn, the emergency of various social media platforms has changed the ways users consume news by offering an alternative with more choices that are efficient, updated, convenient, and trustworthy (Te, 2021). Especially in the crisis communication activities that are considered to be more complex, even raises new possibilities where each company will be more vulnerable to crisis with a greater impact than before (W. T. Coombs & Holladay, 2018) Supported by Alfonso & Suzanne (2008) which shows that the internet besides being a new media in a crisis, but can also be a new stimulus for the crisis. So that the changes that occur are also necessary to be accompanied by changes in the mindset of a PR so as not to underestimate the crisis that has not yet occurred because the crisis can occur at any time without being predicted.

Below are the results of an interview that discusses how the management of basic issues that have been implemented by airline companies, particularly by the public relations unit:

> "It can, for example, be that we have a potential issue related to the company's reputation, so we will issue a statement. Well, first for conventional media, we refer to it as the right of responsibility, if there is news that is not appropriate then we will provide answers and explanation. We have not abandoned the use of conventional media, it is still one of the important tools, because in my opinion there are still many people who believe in conventional media, and they may even tend to believe in conventional media rather than internet media that have been reduced to hoax information." (Interview with D.I. in December 2020).

Based on the interview above it can be said that Public Relations of airline companies regularly conducts a screening of potential issues that might threaten a company's reputation which could possibly end up as a crisis. This can be included in the management of the initial stages of the issue where it is conducted to prevent as much as possible an issue growing into a crisis. The measures being implemented by the Public Relations of airline companies can also be categorized under the pre-crisis stage, wherein at this stage, the crisis communication focuses on determining and reducing the risks that may occur. This stage is dominated by preventive actions from the company where the management team uses its vigilance or sensitivity in seeing the issue or event from the time before the crisis occurs. In this stage it is recommended that the company starts its communication with stakeholders by conveying messages about the potential for crisis to reduce the impact due to crisis and become a shield for the company on the latter in facing the negative responses of the media and the public. Historians argue that organisations can effectively leverage the 'interactivity' features of   social media platforms by engaging in dialogue with stakeholders, paying attention to content generated by the community, adopting strategies that resonate with stakeholder preferences, building opinion leaders on social media platforms, and producing equally compelling contents having bold texts, images, or videos to strengthen the organisation's legitimacy (Cheng, 2018).

> "Now for the management of issues in relation to the internet it is indeed pure our work, yes, after all, it is called issue management. For the management of the issue itself, there are a number of things we can do, one option for us is denial, stating that the news is not

true. However, we must acknowledge that the community is also now more discerning. So, we need to implement strategies that would serve as a distraction. For example, we have given sufficient answers then after that we will make something that will attract more attention. As a result, the original issue will naturally die and be replaced by the new, carefully crafted issue, that is of course, positive." (Interview with D.I. in December 2020).

Based on the statement above, it can also be seen that issue management is the primary job carried out by public relations professionals in the company. In addition, in this stage, it is also emphasised how important it is to integrate the management of the issue and management of the crisis. The crisis management team can try to find the signs of the potential for a crisis that can be followed by preparing a plan that can mitigate the outbreak of the issue, as it is the most important thing to prevent the crisis from occurring. Some recent studies have discussed a lot about the best way to increase sensitivity in seeing the crisis that might occur (crisis sensing) one of them is by routinely monitoring mass media. Today, with information and communication technology development, crisis-sensing activities can also be done using the Internet. No less interesting is the statement of speakers about how effective issues can also increase reputation:
"It can also increase reputation because of corporate non-marketing information, for example, the achievement of the company or the signing of agreements with other companies. These also fall within our domain as public relations professionals. Well, that's one of our key crucial moments. While we may receive many complaints for example on our social media but we can also publish our achievements. This strikes a balance on our reputation in social media, in countering the negative comments that we have been receiving. So social media is also very useful in increasing reputation of course. " (Interview with I.N.A. in December 2020).

Furthermore, in addition to running the management of fundamental issues, airline companies also have written issue management protocols in the form of company policy products called the 'Emergency Response Plan' (ERP). This ERP system, particularly, has made the writer interested in conducting this research. As stated by the second resource, who is an ERP Manager and provided key insights regarding an ERP system itself.
"Emergency Response Plan is a corporate guideline for handling emergency situations. ERP itself was refined in 2005 and was only inaugurated in 2006 by the Board of Directors." (Interview   with   I.N.A.   in   December   2020).

Even ERP in airline companies has its own special division, the Emergency Response Plan division that stands in the Airline Centre for Operations Unit where the unit is one of the units that can communicate directly with field officers such as pilots and cabin crew.
"Our division is tasked in leading its ERP documents, regularly we also hold a simulation, with the head office or with a branch office. We have a lot of branch offices, and they also participate in training, in which we practice the use of the WhatsApp application." (Interview   with   I.N.A.   in   December   2020).

As an airline, this company is aware of their vulnerable positions in the face of crises, this consequently requires a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) or a special policy related to handling crisis management that has been established and approved by the entire company management– the policy is called the Emergency Response Plan, hereinafter abbreviated as ERP. The policy was made as one of the company's efforts in dealing with events that they cannot predict (unpredictable events) going forward and the worst is the crisis itself.
The crisis faced by airlines is not an ordinary crisis situation (Ray, 1999),rather, they have the tendency to attract global interest in different levels of society.
(Grundy & Moxon, 2013). Therefore, the management team hopes that the existence of ERP will reduce the impact caused by the crisis that hit their company. ERP is the spearhead of the success of the management of the airline company crisis. As brand crises negatively affect brand attitude (Dutta & Pullig, 2011), there is a strong argument for airlines to develop capacities in handling crises so that they can manage it effectively (Hsiu-Ying Kao et al., 2020).
The implementation of the Emergency Response Plan (ERP) by an airline company has been instrumental in the company's success in managing crises. Since its establishment in 1998,

ERP has not only helped airline companies navigate various crises but also earned the company international recognition, such as the IPRA Award in 2007.

Airline Company's ERP has since become a benchmark for other organisations in crisis management. One of the key elements of an airline company's ERP is the establishment of a cross-functional crisis management team known as the Emergency Crisis Coordination (ECC) team. The team includes key departments such as Corporate Communications (CorComm), Safety and Security, Finance, and Operations. The airline's public relations stated: "The goal of ERP is to ensure that all related parties have a shared understanding of what needs to be done in a crisis. The ECC team consists of leaders from various departments who carry out their specific roles during a crisis." This approach aligns with the Crisis Management Theory (Rothberg, 2002), which emphasises the importance of clear communication and coordinated action across organisational departments during a crisis. Effective crisis management requires an organised team that can quickly respond to evolving situations and manage the crisis comprehensively.

Airline Companies emphasise regular crisis simulations, including tabletop exercises and workshops, to prepare the team for real crises. These simulations are designed to closely mirror actual crisis conditions, helping the team to understand and practice their roles under pressure. This approach aligns with the concept of Crisis Communication Preparedness (T. Coombs & Holladay, 2010), which suggests that organisations can significantly improve their crisis response by preparing their teams through training and simulations. Regular crisis drills ensure that the team is ready to react quickly and efficiently when a real crisis arises.

The roles of different departments in an Airline Company's ERP are clearly defined to ensure smooth cooperation across different departments in the company during a crisis. For example, the Corporate Communications team is responsible for issuing official statements; the Finance team analyses costs, and the Operations team assesses the incident's nature. This multi-departmental approach highlights the importance of Interdepartmental Coordination (Massey & Larsen, 2006) in crisis management. According to this theory, successful crisis management requires that different departments within an organisation work together efficiently and share relevant information to resolve the crisis effectively.

By synthesising these insights, it becomes clear that an airline company's ERP, with its nature in involving structured team coordination, crisis preparedness, and defined roles, plays a crucial role in mitigating the impact of crises. The company's experience underscores the importance of having a well-organised crisis management plan that integrates multiple departments and prepares the organisation for unpredictable events in the digital era.

Exposure to the results of previous interviews basically also leads to a conclusion where the company in its efforts to respond to changes in respect to crisis communication brought about by the emergence of the internet, has implemented a crisis communication policy integrated with management. Seeing the increasingly narrow span of time, information circulating faster and more intense, changes in public nature that becomes more active and demanding, and a series of other changes ultimately require companies in this digital era to develop their own policy that would focus on issues and crisis communication management and communication management, like an airline company's ERP. As, almost all companies engaged in any field can be threatened by a crisis every year and is evidenced by the results of a survey (Egelhoff & Sen, 1992):

> "The incidence of corporate crises is increasing at an alarming rate. A recent survey of 114 Fortune 1000 companies found that large corporations now face an average of 10 major crises yearly."

Management Policies and Planning Issues integrated with crisis management play an important role in the company's short-term and long-term strategies, both crisis and non-crisis strategies. The research discovered that even large companies could not survive in the face of crisis if they did not have a good crisis management planning and communication strategy (Penrose, 2000). In that manner, the airline company's ERP preparation business is in response with the trend and scientific study of how to deal with crises more effectively.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the role of information and communication technologies, particularly internet-based media, has significantly influenced public relations (PR) practices, especially in issue management activities. In the digital era, PR practitioners perceive crises as becoming increasingly complex, which necessitates the development of updated and comprehensive crisis communication policies.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of structured and proactive crisis management. One good example is an airline company's implementation of the Emergency Response Plan (ERP). The ERP, which has undergone several updates to adapt to digital advancements, serves as a benchmark for managing crises in a complex and interconnected business environment.

The study identifies three (3) key aspects. First, the Integrated Crisis Management Team– forming an Emergency Crisis Coordination (ECC) team allows the company to ensure effective collaboration across various departments, such as Corporate Communications, Finance, Operations, and Safety and Security. This approach aligns with theoretical principles that emphasise the importance of interdepartmental coordination in crisis management. Second, crisis preparedness through simulations– regular crisis simulations and workshops enable team members to practice their roles in near-real scenarios, which enhances their response readiness. These preparedness measures significantly reduce potential disruptions during crises. Lastly, challenges in the digital era include the increasing role of social media, which adds dual dimensions to crisis management. While it creates opportunities for positive engagement and brand advocacy, it also heightens public scrutiny and reputational risks, which requires companies to develop and adopt more dynamic crisis communication strategies.

Based on these findings, the study offers several recommendations. From an academic standpoint, future researchers are encouraged to explore issue management and crisis communication policies in different organisational settings, such as government and private institutions, to broaden the scope of research in the digital era. From a practical perspective, policymakers and PR practitioners are advised to recognise the critical importance of integrating issue management with crisis management strategies in the digital era. This integration is essential for addressing the increasingly complex nature of crises effectively. By addressing the challenges of digital advancements and emphasising preparedness, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how aviation companies and similar organizations can more effectively navigate crises in today's dynamic environment.

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