

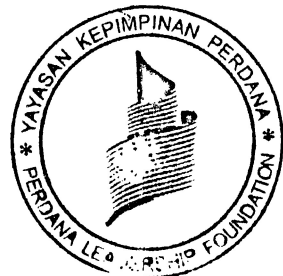




**DAVID KIRKHAM**

**KRISHNAMOORTHY MUTHALY**

**FLYING THROUGH CRISIS**  
**MH370: LESSONS IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION**



**PUSTAKA PERDANA**



**1012117**

*First published in Malaysia in 2015*

*Publisher:*

Krishnamoorthy Muthaly  
No. 3, Lorong 11/6C, 46200 Petaling Jaya,  
Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia  
Email: krishnamuthaly@gmail.com

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*Muthaly, Krishnamoorthy, 1949-*  
*Kirkham, David, 1943-*

*Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia / Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

*Flying Through Crisis. MH370: Lessons in Crisis Communications*  
*by David Kirkham and Krishnamoorthy Muthaly*  
ISBN 978-967-12950-0-7

1. Muthaly, Krishnamoorthy 1949-: Kirkham, David 1943-  
2. Crisis Communications. 3. MH370  
658.4056

*Printed by:*

SK Graphic Solutions,  
7G, Jalan PJS 10/4,  
Bandar Sunway, 46000 Petaling Jaya,  
Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.

*Cover design by Tar Chuak, Saito College*

Dedicated to the passengers,  
crew and families of MH370 and MH17



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# INSIGHTS FROM MH370

Unbelievably and tragically, Malaysia Airlines suffered a double disaster in 2014. Flight MH17 was shot down with all passengers and crew over Ukraine four months after the Kuala Lumpur to Beijing flight MH370 disappeared.

Whilst this book addresses what remains one of the 21st Century's greatest mysteries with the loss of MH370 on 8th March 2014, the second tragedy affords a unique opportunity to compare the communications responses to both crises. The authors have been able to add to the original manuscript a chapter on learning from the crisis. In addition, the future of Malaysia Airlines was placed in greater jeopardy by the downing of MH17 and so the chapter reviewing the crisis impacts has been updated.

The book is an extended case study in public and media communications during a crisis. The first hundred days of what may be many more are covered here. The book does not speculate over the final resting place of Malaysian Airlines flight 370 nor does it seek to explain why the Boeing 777 disappeared. What it does do is provide sound and entirely practical advice on how to handle communications in a complex and long-running crisis.

The book emphasises learning from the crisis by concentrating both on those things which went well and those which did not. People learn more from doing things right than from doing them wrong. It is a handbook for professional crisis communicators and university students studying communications. It does not peddle platitudes nor does it over-theorise. But it does tell you how to do it.

The book addresses media relations, press conferences, written statements, interactions between media and families, social media use, training spokespeople, media agendas, angles and politics and delivering key messages. Dynamic strategies are introduced as a framework for planning by crisis teams. There is a good cross-section of the local and global media coverage, more pertinent because co-author Krishna was present at the press conferences and worked with local and foreign journalists during the crisis.

Krishna brings different perspectives grounded in solid practical experience. He has worked in corporate communications in a corporation; he

has studied media at university; he has worked as a journalist covering many crises; he has worked as a trainer and facilitator of media response teams; he has lectured on journalism at universities and in international forums; and he has mentored and trained spokespeople in facing the media.

We have grounded much of this well-researched material in sound academic theory producing what is designed to be a balanced and insightful analysis of communication responses by the Malaysian and Australian governments, Malaysia Airlines and other affected parties. Krishna captured the media events as they unfolded and the book provides artefacts which will, over time, cease to be readily accessible. The immediacy is striking.

I trust this book will provide the practical guidance for crisis communications that is so often lacking in other texts. It tells you how to do it and it is grounded in the real world and illustrated with abundant examples during the extended MH370 crisis.

*David Kirkham*  
*January 2015*

# LEARNING IS A JOURNEY

*Flying Through Crisis* is written in all humility about how Malaysia, propelled onto the world stage, handled the crisis communications. The book is designed to help communications specialists to be better equipped to manage a crisis. The response to MH370 and MH17 provides vivid, relevant and educational case studies with local, regional and international dimensions.

With our combined 60 years of experience in facing crisis communications, teaching and coaching real crisis scenarios we delve into the expected and unexpected. How to prepare and how to perform professionally in managing the media. We will let you into the secrets of what journalists want. They want you to tell your honest story, in a way that will inform, educate and entertain their audience.

I believe learning is a journey, not a destination. Join us on this journey in learning from the mistakes and the successes about how to improve our crisis response. I am still learning with you – learning new facets of a crisis. We may not know everything, but we must have an open mind and heart to learn from other people, whatever position they hold. The fallout from MH370 and MH17 has taught me a lot. However, the mystery of the lost MH370 continues.

I do not claim to be an expert in communications or in aviation. As a journalist for over 30 years, I have reported on several crises. No matter how difficult my assignments, I took on the challenges and these became tougher by the day. I have been an eyewitness to national blackouts, fires, plane crashes and corporate fraud. These insights prompted me to share my experiences both as a journalist and, now, as a trainer in crisis communications. Here, I share my knowledge and experience in trying to better understand the MH370 and MH17 crises.

In this book, we provide what you have got to know, understand and how to take the appropriate actions. We provide such tips as when you face the media and remain cool: you are the expert of your organisation and not the journalist. So, prepare for the worst by staying calm. Most of all rehearse, brainstorm, anticipate questions, be brief and honest.

Any organisation that develops good relationships with the media is one that promotes the organisation and its business. Your positioning, seizing

media opportunities and performing well is the way to succeed in a crisis. Whenever a crisis is badly handled, the organisation is doomed. Its very survival is at risk, its reputation and standing are damaged and its stakeholders, which include the media, will withdraw their support.

The days of ignoring the media are gone. If you fail to communicate, you fail to succeed. Your stakeholders will not understand or forgive you. Malaysia Airlines and the Government learnt from the communications boo boos it made in MH370, thus improving their performance during the MH17 disaster.

As the media continued playing up the crisis, especially the negative aspects about the response, it is the knowledge, skills and training of the responders, combined with their confidence that will influence the perceptions both of those directly impacted and the public. While attending and observing the press conferences for more than two months, it was obvious to me that some, but certainly not all, of the spokespeople were neither well trained nor properly advised about managing the media. They took it for granted that it was easy to manage the media. As a result what evolved in press conferences was a media circus.

These deficiencies were also recognised by the government and the Malaysian Prime Minister Dato' Seri Najib Tun Razak commented, **“But we didn't get everything right. In the first few days after the plane disappeared, we were so focused on trying to find the aircraft that we did not prioritise our communications.”** So, it's important to learn how to conduct yourself professionally in a media briefing or press conference.

The reputation of Malaysia Airlines and the government is influenced by perceptions created by the media. This book explores how to communicate effectively, value your reputation and provides practical ideas for effectively managing the organisation's image. It will also examine the impact of broadcast and multimedia technologies on public opinion. It will further discuss how TV networks and print media face fierce competition reaching out to consumers through ratings and circulation battles. This book about communicating in a disaster is far from being the last word in the effort to enhance professionalism and communication skills among our leaders, spokespeople and communications specialists. I have enjoyed researching and writing this

book with Dr. David Kirkham who has been an excellent mentor. We will be happy if more such books are written by those with hands-on experience of a crisis. I am sure there are those who have different opinions on the subject. We welcome any feedback and constructive comments which will challenge us to explore innovative options. After all, if anyone is afraid of being criticised, then there will be no books written. As a journalist, to get the other side of the story, I personally e-mailed to top officials in MAS, Department of Civil Aviation and Malaysia Airports Holdings Berhad for their comments. I did not get any response on MH370 crisis management.

Many people advised me against writing this book. “Don’t write anything that will hurt our leaders, the Government or the airlines” on the ill-fated MH 370’s disappearance. However, life is about choices. How can a writer not write? How can a singer not sing? How can a prime minister not lead his country? MH370 is not something that can be ignored when the whole Malaysian nation was thrust into the global spotlight like never before. How can we not write when MH370 search engines show more than 36 million results in Google and almost 600,000 videos in YouTube?

Having worked with international media on the MH370 crisis, I feel this is an opportunity to record the events as I witnessed them. I am confident this book has lessons we can all learn from. Without passion life is nothing. No one is perfect. To err is human. It is in this spirit that we can improve our crisis management skills. From learning comes understanding and knowledge. Knowledge sets us free, for it is ignorance that keeps people fearful that we will be arrested if we express our views.

*Krishnamoorthy Muthaly*  
*January 2015*  
*krishnamuthaly@gmail.com*



# 1

# WINNING STRATEGIES

---

No country has performed to perfection in any crisis and Malaysia is no exception. Nevertheless, lessons have to be learned with nothing swept under the carpet. What's done cannot be undone. But, there is always room for improvement and well-informed criticisms have to be faced. Nancy Argyle, one of Canada's most experienced disaster communicators, was critical of the crisis communications managed by Malaysia. "It's quite clear that the communications team has lost all credibility with the ones they serve. Their actions were overshadowed by what went wrong."

Malaysia Airlines and the Malaysian government will be influenced by perceptions created by the media. Whilst this book does not seek to speculate on why MH370 disappeared or on where it is, it does explore how to communicate effectively, safeguard or restore your reputation and provides practical ideas to effectively manage your crisis communications. It examines the impact of multimedia technologies on public opinion and looks at how TV and print media coverage is influenced by ratings and circulation wars. Practical guidance is given on press conferences, writing media releases and using social media.

## *The Context*

Over 300 media organisations descended on Malaysia, scrutinising every move made and every statement issued. MH370 tested Malaysia's resolve and perseverance as never before. Social media has made crisis management more difficult with Twitter, Facebook and blogs fuelling the media frenzy. The tragedy of MH370 turned into a national crisis for Malaysia. The negative reports have marred the country's image.

Every organisation is vulnerable to crisis and managing it is not easy. Whenever a crisis is badly handled, an organisation is doomed. Its very survival is at risk, its reputation and standing is damaged and its stakeholders, which include the media, will withdraw their support. The days of ignoring the media are gone. If you fail to communicate, you fail to succeed. Your stakeholders will not understand or forgive you.

Sometimes, organisations are unprepared for the communications side of a disaster even though they are well-prepared for an operational response. Ironically, no matter how good your operational response, if your communication is poor, the public will perceive that you have failed on both accounts. If you don't prepare, you will incur more damage and costs.

As the media continues playing up a crisis, especially the negative aspects about the response, it is the knowledge, skills and training of the responders that matters. Combined with their confidence that influences the perceptions of those directly impacted and of the public. While attending the press conferences, it was obvious that some, but certainly not all, of the spokespeople were neither well trained nor properly advised about managing the media.

These deficiencies were recognised by the government and the Malaysian prime minister Dato' Seri Najib Tun Razak commented, **“But we didn't get everything right. In the first few days after the plane disappeared, we were so focused on trying to find the aircraft that we did not prioritise our communications.”** So, it's important to learn how to conduct yourself professionally in a press conference, interview or through the written word.

### *Expectations of Effective Communications*

In a crisis, the expectations placed on government and company officials are at their most demanding. So what went wrong with communications surrounding the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 and how could this have been done better? A good crisis communications team should be able to handle any disaster scenario.

“Without competent disaster communications leadership, any company or government tends to flounder,” said Argyle. “Especially, in a crisis, the expectations placed on government officials are immense. This is the time the public has very little tolerance or patience for error. After all, if you can't trust your government in a disaster, who can you trust?”

There must be no 'spin' in crisis communications. Telling the truth from the outset is the key to successfully managing the media. Once you start the spin, the media can spin even better than the authorities. If this attitude of spinning sets in, then any organisation is doomed to failure. A more self-critical stance will help in better understanding the complexities of crisis communications in the Internet age.

Communicators must learn how to use new tools of social media and adopt the right strategies for positioning the organisation and delivering key messages through different media. For this to happen, one has to be empowered in order to convince opinion leaders through your network of producers, editors, influential bloggers and reporters from mainstream and social media. This network, with its contact lists, is the public relations lifebelt in the eye of the crisis storm.

### ***Relations with the Media***

*"The media's the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that's power."* Malcolm X.

*"Four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets."* Napoleon.

The media have a role to inform, educate and challenge. They desire to get the breaking news. In this process they pursue stories that they think will interest their readers, listeners or viewers. So why is it that organisations or governments cannot see what was disseminated and highlighted at their press conference? Many media covering MH370 seem to have picked only the negative comments on the negative questions the reporters asked.

This is because the media have their own agendas. Just like organisations have their vision and mission. For this reason the media will pursue how they want to angle their stories. The editor, reporter and producer of the TV news all play a part in deciding how the news is structured and delivered.

Is luck part of this formula in managing a crisis? No. Luck is not part of a winning media formula in a crisis. So, successful media strategies to ensure your messages are accurately reported are to pitch your angle in a unique way, to tell your story in an engaging manner and communicate with journalists on their terms, being sensitive to their needs.

“The media are out to get me” is often said by those questioned in a press conference. Some individuals shy away from the media for this reason. But, have you thought for a moment if you were trained well to *Face the Media*, you could seize the opportunity to turn a negative scenario to a more balanced one?

Many executives declare that there is no such thing as a ‘good’ interview. Their frequent comments are, “I didn’t say that about MH370” or “They took what I said out of context.” At this time, damage control aimed at counteracting the negative news is vital. This requires training in the most suitable techniques of crisis communication. In order to counter biased or inaccurate news reports, the editor concerned should be contacted. Issues should be highlighted, backed by evidence, to ensure suitable corrections are put in place in the interest of fair, accurate and balanced reporting.

### ***Dealing with Speculation***

Good crisis communications, Nancy Argyle argued, should deliver critical information in a timely manner, to ease fear and anxiety, to comfort the people impacted and to dispel rumours. “Most importantly, even if you have no information to share, you must still keep communicating,” said Argyle, who incidentally holds a commercial pilot’s licence.

During an information vacuum, journalists begin to speculate and rumour mongering becomes rife. For example, one conspiracy theory revolved around Diego Garcia, a joint US-UK Indian Ocean military base. Purported motives varied, but it involved MH370 being hijacked - whether remotely or by special forces - and then flown to Diego Garcia where the crew and passengers are being held prisoners.

In this case, both the US embassy and the Malaysian government immediately discounted this rumour. However, the difficulty arises when the organisation is unable to verify information. Then it is unwise to speculate. For example, the acting transport minister and defence minister, Dato’ Seri Hashimuddin Hussein declined to speculate that a private phone call was made by the co-pilot as he supposedly overflew Penang.

Many other conspiracy theories on MH370’s disappearance began to circulate through the media or by word of mouth. This is dangerous. One technique in replying to a reporter’s speculative question is to say

*“We have heard exactly the same rumour as you have and, like you, we are working hard to verify it or discount it.”*

### **Transparency**

When authorities delay in giving information to the public through the media, they are criticised for not being open, transparent and honest. Confirmed and verified information must be released promptly, provided its release does not jeopardise the response. Any failure to be transparent creates distrust of the organisations involved and fuels speculation.

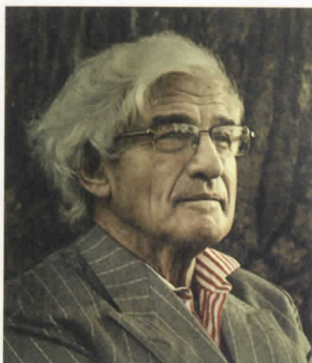
So, who is to be blamed - the media? Yes, because they created those speculations. How about the airline? Yes. Because the media will assume the airline has something to hide. The late disclosure of the MH370 cargo manifest is a case in point. This was not published publicly until 1st May 2014, although it was included in the preliminary accident report to the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) within 30 days.

When the manifest was not initially released, the reply could have been: “Yes. It is under police investigation and once it is declassified we will reveal the manifest. The police do not provide details of their enquiries for fear of jeopardising future court actions.” The public will be unhappy with the MAS reply that the manifest is confidential and are likely still to assume that the company has something to hide.

You will be faced with some questions that you are forbidden on legal or national security grounds from answering. Whatever happens, don't ever say ‘No comment.’ This is suicidal and a suspicious reporter or editor may speculate that you are trying to hide something. Corporate cover-ups have a long history and journalists have long memories. The cover-up is usually worse than the original sin, which may be forgiven.

So when faced with the impossible question, there are some acceptable responses which should then be linked to the key messages:

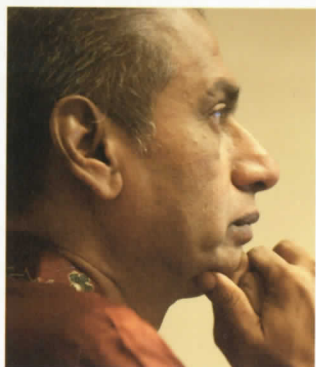
- No, I don't have the answer, but I'll get it for you. (The media will suspect you are buying time to avoid the question, so you must deliver the answer quickly).
- Yes, I do have the answer, but I can't discuss it immediately because the Board will have to endorse my response as it is a policy matter.



**David Kirkham**, TD, BA, MSc, PhD is acknowledged as an authority on managing under uncertainty. He has worked in 38 countries in most industrial and commercial sectors and advises governments on risk and crisis. He has taught at Liverpool, Ulster and Sheffield Universities, for Laureate Education, the Fire Service College and for professional institutes.

His global portfolio includes managing adverse events, communication strategies, strategic decision making and scenario planning. He has prepared executives to face the media in the UK, Russia, China, Malaysia, Australia, Japan, Latin America, Indonesia, Singapore, Sri Lanka and the Gulf States. He has developed crisis communications teams for

multi-national corporations and practised them in simulated crisis scenarios. Several teams have successfully faced a real crisis. He undertakes academic research into social media use in a crisis and continues to lecture at universities. [david.kirkham@calistroconsultants.com](mailto:david.kirkham@calistroconsultants.com)



Graduating in communications from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville **Krishnamoorthy Muthaly**, BSc (Hons) was a journalist for 25 years at *The Star and New Straits Times*. As an investigative reporter, he went undercover as a beggar, blind man, MP and security guard, generating many front page splashes. He currently freelances for CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera, French, German & Australian TV networks.

*The You in Journalism*, his fourth book, is used as a university textbook. He won Journalist of the Year (1987) and Consumer Journalist of the Year (1998). Krishna has lectured on media relations and crisis communications in Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and the US, as well as at international conferences. He trains government officials

and ambassadors and has taught at Monash, HELP, Murdoch and UTAR universities and lectures at media workshops for banks, government agencies, the armed forces, the police and the energy industries. As a president of the International Students Club in the university he invited and chaired a meeting with President Carter and student leaders at the 1982 World's Fair in Knoxville. [krishnamuthaly@gmail.com](mailto:krishnamuthaly@gmail.com)

***"Practical, quick, positive and effective responses to crisis,"***

Associate Prof. Dr Sivamurugan Pandian, Political Sociologist, Science University of Malaysia.

***"Informs, inspires and gives insight into PR response to crisis,"***

Dato' Seri Azman Ujang, former Editor-in-Chief of Bernama, Malaysia's national news agency.

***"Gives tips on how to manage crisis for CEOs, Heads of Departments, PR professionals,"***

Datuk Dr Marimuthu Nadason, President, Federation of Malaysian Consumers Association

***"Passion drives excellence. Krishna and David inspire us with their passion, experience and knowledge in managing crisis,"*** R. Srikanth, CEO Moving Walls.

MYR 45.00

GBP 8.99

AUD 14.00

USD 15.00

ISBN 978-967-12950-0-7



9 789671 295007