

Week 11.

Crisis Com in Greater China &

Spokespersons

27 March 2017

Questions



Today's learning goals

1. Recognize the peculiarities of crisis communication and management in **Greater China** (大中华地区).
2. Learn about the differences in crisis communication practices in Greater China through **case studies**.
3. Design the most suitable response during a press conference and develop the most notable skills needed by **spokespeople**.

Crisis Communication – A global discipline?

- The field of crisis communication was **born in the United States** and has only recently started to become global.
- The majority of crisis communication theories and models have been developed by US-based scholars.
 - These models are primarily based on the social, political and cultural characteristics of the US.
 - Some of these models have been tested in certain European countries.

Crisis Communication in Greater China

- Existing crisis communication theories have been “**imported**” (applied) to the study of crises in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.
- Some **researchers have questioned the validity of these theories** in Greater China, given the different cultural values, political and economic systems, and social norms.

Crisis Communication in Greater China - Origins

- According to Shi Anbin, crisis communication & management became an important discipline in Greater China after the 2003 SARS outbreak.
 - For Hong Kong, it unveiled **the lack of preparation** for a large scale crisis.
 - For China, it revealed **the consequences of inaction** and led to new policies regulating how to communicate during a crisis.



The first case of SARS was identified in Guangdong in 2002, but the outbreak of the virus was not notified until 2003.



SARS caused the death of 299 people in Hong Kong, 349 people in Mainland China and 37 people in Taiwan.

The 2003 SARS outbreak was an unprecedented crisis for both the Chinese and Hong Kong governments

SARS 2003 Crisis

- The HK government failed in effectively communicating the SARS crisis in 5 ways (Lee 2009):
 - Inability to speak with a **single-voice**.
 - Lack of a crisis **communication strategy**.
 - Poor **media relations**.
 - Ineffective **strategies** (minimization at first).
 - Lack of **transparency and openness**.

Cultural factors

- Huang, Wu and Cheng (2016) claim that there are cultural specificities in Greater China that have an impact on crisis communication.
 - Losing (saving) **face** or **mianzi** (失面子)
 - The “**golden mean**” or **zhongyong** (中庸)
 - Collectivism
 - Importance of relations or **guanxi** (关系)
 - Nationalism

Strategies in Greater China (I)

- There has been a tendency among Chinese crisis communication managers to take “passive” strategies:
 - The **practice of covering up** includes other sub-strategies, such as prohibitions on reporting and deception.
 - No **comment/response**. Avoiding to provide answers to the media and other stakeholders is often seen as a safe and preferable option.

Strategies in Greater China (II)

- Huang, Lin and Sun (2005) found that, in Taiwan, a common strategy not identified in US-born theories is “**diversion**”.
- Diversion includes “strategies that try to **put the issue ‘to rest’** or distract public or media attention by creating a different issue or temporarily easing public anger by showing regards (while not apologizing)” (p. 235)

Strategies in Greater China (III)

- The appearance of a “diversion” tactic in Greater China could be explained by cultural values & traits such as harmony, the maintenance of face and the preference for indirect communication.
- Research has also revealed that **“extreme” crisis communication** strategies (such as attacking the accuser or apologizing) are infrequent.

Top 10 strategies in Taiwan

Scale: 1 = never used; 5 = always used

| | SD |
|---|------|
| Reduce the outside attack by emphasizing former positive actions. | 3.83 |
| Promise to right the wrong/and or make proactive actions in the future. | 3.58 |
| State that the event is not so serious as the outside view says | 3.21 |
| Reframe the facets and the causes of the event in a more positive way. | 3.15 |
| State that the corporation is one of the victims | 2.96 |
| Show regards and/or distress to express feelings | 2.71 |
| Provide the public with instructive information (i.e. how to react to the crisis) | 2.66 |
| Provide the public with adaptive information (i.e. present basic information) | 2.64 |
| Promise to change the corporate public policy | 2.35 |
| Promise to compensate the victims | 2.26 |

(Huang, Lin & Su, 2005, p. 232)

Differences within Greater China

- Although countries in the Greater China region share many cultural similarities, there are differences in their **political and media systems**.
 - China is a *de facto* single-party State in an authoritarian political system, with limited press freedom
 - Hong Kong is a multi-party system, with limited voting rights for citizens, and a free media system.
 - Taiwan is a multi-party democratic system with a free media system.

Mainland China | Political system

- Because the government (and the Party) are at the top of the hierarchy of power, during a crisis, **authorities often take the lead** in communicating with the publics.
- There is an **asymmetric relationship** between stakeholders. The government is able to overpower all of them. Traditionally, individuals (consumers) were the least powerful. Social media is changing this.

Mainland China | Media system

- The majority of mass media do not act as “watchdogs,” as they are usually expected to do in liberal democracies. So **media surveillance is generally low.**
- The mass media operate in a **severely regulated market**, which is ultimately expected to serve “national interests” and those of the Party.

Crisis Communication in Hong Kong & Taiwan

- The existence of separation of powers in Taiwan in Hong Kong guarantees **limited intervention by the government** in any non-governmental crisis.
- The principle of freedom of expression and extreme competition in the news media market leads to **strong media surveillance** during, before and after a crisis.

Two Crises in Mainland China

Wenchuan ,
Sichuan, 2008



The Chinese government was
“praised” for its crisis
communication

Wenzhou, Zhejiang,
2011



The Chinese government was
criticised for its crisis
communication

Converging societies, converging crises?

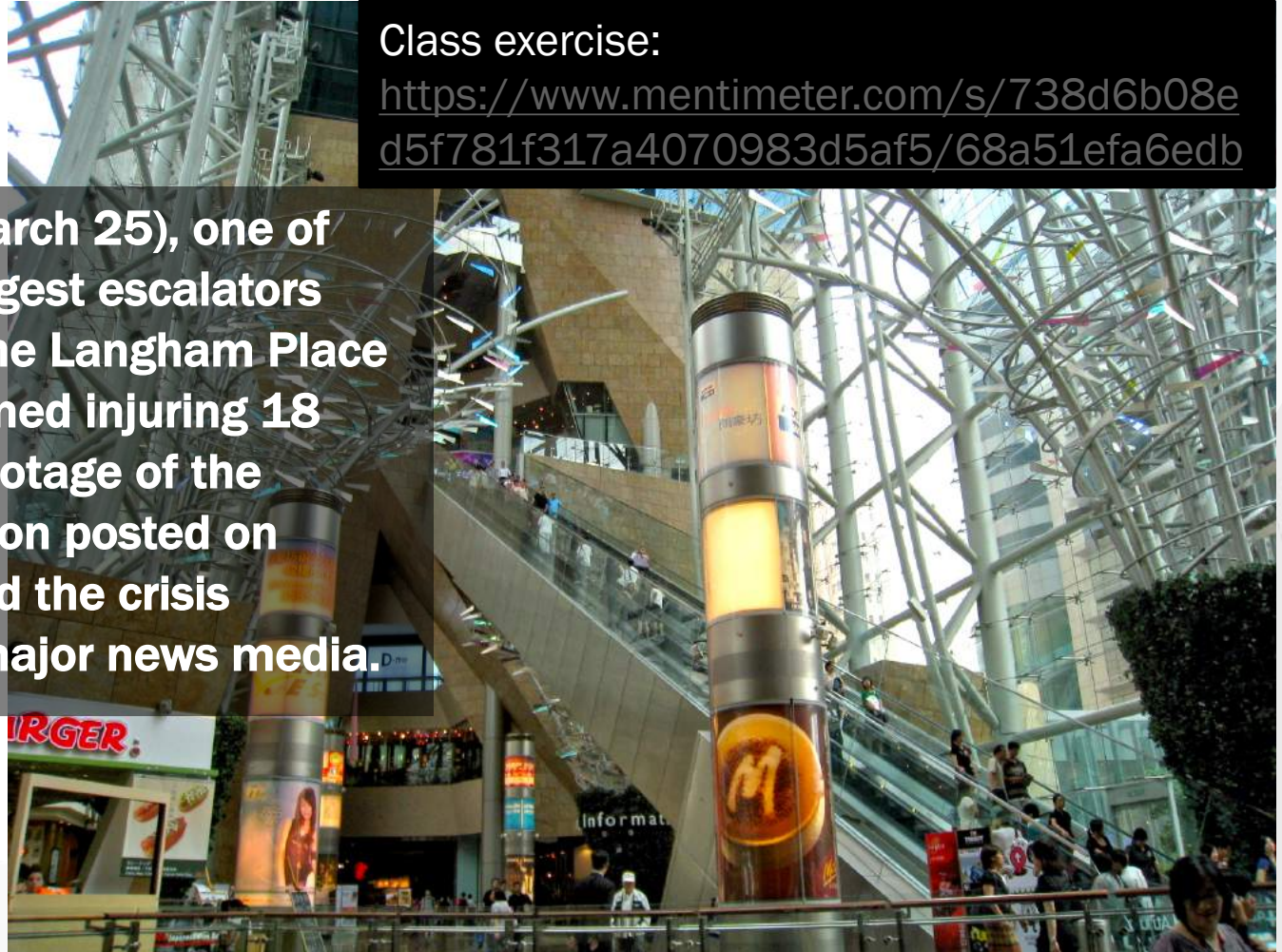
- Ongoing political, societal and economic changes in Greater China are minimizing the impact of some of the differences we described earlier:
 - User-powered **media accountability is increasing** in Mainland China, which means it is less easy to cover-up crises.
 - Consumers are becoming **more demanding** in terms of quality of products & services, as well as organizational responses to crisis.
 - Increasing **interconnectedness between regions**, means that differences in political/media systems are diffused.
 - Increasing **political (and economic) influence** of Beijing over Hong and Taiwan limits maneuvering by crisis affected organisations.

Langham Place (朗豪坊) Crisis

Class exercise:

<https://www.mentimeter.com/s/738d6b08ed5f781f317a4070983d5af5/68a51efa6edb>

On Saturday (March 25), one of Hong Kong's largest escalators located inside the Langham Place Mall malfunctioned injuring 18 people. Video footage of the accident was soon posted on social media and the crisis reported in all major news media.



Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/42/Langham_Place_Void_2008.jpg

Langham Place (朗豪坊) Crisis

- None of the organisations involved has issued an apology or an admission of guilt. They have simply extended their sympathy with the victims.
 - In a tightly regulated context as in the case of Hong Kong, any such action **could entail a lawsuit and expensive payouts.**
- There has been **no direct communication with the general public.** All communication has been through the media, directly with the victims or (presumably with government and police.

Langham Place (朗豪坊) Crisis

- Langham Place appears in the media with at least 3 **spokespersons** (one man, one woman and the general manager).
- The “slow” response triggered **speculation on social media** and the news media, with several “alternative theories” about the cause of the accident circulating online.
 - Remember that information voids are dangerous and need to be filled in as soon as possible.

Langham Place (朗豪坊) Crisis

- The initial response on Saturday from **Langham Place** was instructing and adjusting information and denial of the rumors. It was followed by corrective action and “compensation.”
- The response from **OTIS** took over 24 hours and was limited to showing sympathy with the injured and some “compensation,” including a visit to the hospital.

Spokesperson

- When a crisis strikes, all organisations must appoint a single or multiple spokespeople who will ultimately be **speaking with a united voice** – they will all tell the same story.
 - The selected spokespeople (with at least 2 or 3 replacements) **should be listed in the crisis management plan.**
 - For most companies, **the preferred spokesperson is the CEO** or the highest ranking member of an organisation.

News Conferences

- Not every crisis calls for a news conference. Most initial responses can be delivered through printed announcements or statements, that can be posted online too.
- Prior to a news conference, **a statement should be prepared**. The news conference should always start with the spokesperson reading the statement in order to set the tone of the news conference.

News Conferences

- Spokespeople should have **talking points** (short 1-2 sentence-long messages) with the key messages to be conveyed during the press conference.
- Preferably, news conferences should allow for a **Q&A with journalists**. Not doing so might create a hostile environment with journalists.

Five Dos for Spokespeople

1. Do listen to the **whole question** before answering.
2. Do use **everyday language**, not the jargon of your business or profession.
3. Do maintain an attitude showing you are calm, courteous, responsive, direct, positive, truthful, concerned, and, if necessary, repentant and apologetic.
4. Do tell the truth, **the whole truth**. Misleading or omitted facts are also forms of lying.
5. Do **use your crisis communications plan**.

(Fearn-Banks, 2015, p. 51)

Do Nots for Spokespeople

1. Do not look **weak or nervous**.
2. Do not **guess or speculate**. Either you know or you don't.
3. Do not **stick to a story if it has changed**, just to be consistent. The media realize that things change.
4. Do not be trapped into **predicting the future**.
5. Do not **play favorites with the media**. Always favoring one newspaper or one television station is bad business. It can haunt you later.

(Fearn-Banks, 2015, p. 52)

Difficult questions

- During an interview or a news conference, there are always going to be **difficult and trick questions**.
- Whenever facing a difficult question, a spokesperson needs to be able to identify them and address them accordingly.
- The golden rule is **not to break the basic rules** (dos and do nots) of a spokesperson.

Difficult questions

- **Speculative questions** begin with “if.” Always refuse to speculate or to predict the future.
- **Leading questions** imply that the reporter already has the answer; you are merely to verify it.
- **False questions** intentionally contain inaccurate details, to obtain information the company did not want to disclose.
- **Accusatory questions** are designed to force you to blame others.

(Fearn-Banks, 2015, p. 54-56)

Difficult questions

- **Multiple-part questions** can be confusing to you as well as to the public. Ask which part you should answer first. Then answer each part as a separate question.
- **Jargon questions** are those in which technical words or professional jargon are used. In response, use everyday language.
- **Labeling questions aim** to make issues negative or simplistic by seeming to ask for clarity. You should not accept the reporter's labels unless they are fair and accurate.

(Fearn-Banks, 2015, p. 54-56)

Trick questions (Part 1)

1. If young children were on the escalator when the accident happened, they could have died, is that correct?
2. Do you think this accident can happen again in the future?
3. We know that this escalator had a design problem, can you confirm this?
4. This same escalator had over 10 incidents last month, how can that be?

Trick questions (Part 2)

5. Is this accident because of poor maintenance work by your employees?
6. Are people responsible for this accident because they were not properly holding the handrail when they were on the elevator?
7. I have three questions for you: when was the last time the escalator was checked? How often do you check each escalator? And what is the legal requirement?

Trick questions (Part 3)

8. What is exactly the impact of a broken driving chain, the one that couples the driving gear of the escalator with the wheels? And, why didn't the safety device that is expected to stop the escalator work? Is the EMSD going to take responsibility for this?
9. Would you consider this escalator as "unusually long"?

What did we learn today...

- We learnt the **critiques** being made by some about the **universal applicability** of US-centred theories of crisis communication.
- We have used recent examples from Greater China to show how a **process of convergence** is occurring in crisis management globally.
- We have talked about some of the **techniques spokespeople use** when addressing the media during a crisis.

Questions

