

# 10 Communication Lessons from the MH 17 Crash

Presentation at the World Communications Forum in Kuala Lumpur, September 28, 2015

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July 17, 2014. I remember that day very well. It was a regular Thursday – at least, as regular as a day can be when your country is embroiled in an armed conflict, and people are dying every day. By then, we've grown inured to grim news. Still, this headline shook us all. A commercial airliner crashed in the fields of Donetsk region where a war has already raged for several months. 283 passengers, among them 80 children, and 15 crew all perished. It was a Malaysia Airlines flight 17, making its way from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur.

Foul play was immediately suspected. It was later proven that the plane was shot from a Russian-made surface-to-air missile called BUK. Not only has that fateful shot started a new spiral in the growing conflict but it also launched an information war, entangling several governments and nations. So little was known. Emotions raged, blurring the truth, as is often when a senseless tragedy happens. On top of everything, there also was a lot of misinformation, obfuscation and outright lies spread by those who did not care for the world to know the truth.

My name is Yaryna Klyuchkovska. I am managing director of Grou, a public affairs agency in Ukraine. At the time of the tragedy, I was a volunteer with the Ukraine Crisis Media Center, a communications non-profit I helped create when part of Ukrainian territory was annexed by Russia. Ukraine Crisis Media Center, or UCMC, was an established platform for Ukraine's international media outreach. When this tragedy happened, and the international media descended in droves on Ukraine, UCMC became the government's official press center. I had the privilege of working alongside some of the best people in the business who toiled to make sure that the Ukrainian story is heard, and that the facts come to light.



MH17 crashed in the East of Ukraine. It flew on a cruise height on its regular course. As it traversed the easternmost region of Ukraine, it crashed over a territory that was outside Ukraine's control. For a few months, Ukraine had been trying to reestablish peace in the region where pro-Russian separatists overtook the local government and established so-called Donetsk People's Republic. As a result, the Ukrainian government, which was

fully prepared to cooperate, could not provide free access to the crash site to the international team of investigators. So many things were unclear, beginning with the cause of the crash. However, the separatists and their Russian handlers made a mistake.

One of their leaders posted a self-congratulatory post boasting that the separatists shot down a Ukrainian military plane bringing supplies. As soon as he realized the plane was a commercial jet, he

took his post down. The terrorists needed a new explanation – one that was simple and believable. They released information that the Ukrainian army was at fault.

Thus, began the conflict of two competing stories, a bout of information war, which took place in the virtual and media space, but was to have serious consequences in the real world.

Later, it was definitively proven by international investigators that the missile was supplied by and brought from Russia. It took several months for an international investigative journalism organization Bellingcat to prove it, and then German, American and Dutch investigators confirmed.

### Lesson 1.

### Offense is better than defense.

And this brings me to the first lesson I wanted to share. In the crisis situation, being on the defense takes much more work and effort than being on

the offense. It's better to be out there with your story, than to disprove someone else's story. Simply because in a crisis, people tend to grab on to whatever they hear first, and changing their mind is so much more difficult.

We at UCMC came out with the first press release as soon as we were able to cobble together some data from the intelligence agency, the Ministry of Interior and the National Security Council – mere hours after the tragedy happened. But we were already chasing the story that like a high-speed train charged forward, fueled by lies and speculations.



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## Malaysia Airlines Crash: Pro-Russian Terrorists Caught Red-Handed

*Kyiv, July 17, 2014.* Boeing 777 of Malaysia Airlines was hit and crashed in Donetsk region near Ukraine-Russian border after 4 p.m. Kyiv time [GMT +2 – UCMC]. Reportedly, all 298 people on board, including 80 children, have died. According to a 4:50 pm post in a social network Vkontakte by the known pro-Russian terrorist Girkin-Strelkov the downing of the plane was a "successful operation" against the Ukrainian Armed Forces. At the time Girkin-Strelkov didn't realize that this was an international passenger plane travelling from Amsterdam to Kuala-Lumpur through the territory of Ukraine.

The flight MH17 vanished from the radars at approximately 4:20 p.m. Kyiv time. According to the latest confirmed information there were 192 Dutch, 44 Malaysians [including 15 people from the air crew – UCMC], 27 Australians, 12 Indonesians, ten British, four Germans, four Belgians, three Filipinos, one Canadian and one New Zealander on board of the crashed airliner.

Notably, the infamous pro-Russian terrorist and the current commander-in-chief of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Igor Girkin-Strelkov posted a message on his Vkontakte account just 30 minutes after the plane disappearance, boasting the downing of the AN-26 aircraft that he thought belonged to the Ukrainian Armed Forces. "Warnings have been issued – not to fly in "our sky". Here is the video confirmation of yet another "birdfall!," one can read the message on his account. Soon after the tragedy the message "mysteriously" disappeared but by then Ukrainian media have already re-posted screenshots proving the existence of such a statement.

Moreover, the State Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) has released a recording of a phone conversation between the terrorists where they discussed the shooting of the passenger plane from the Chernukhino block post [controlled by the terrorists – UCMC] and first civilian casualties whose bodies they found scattered around the area of the crash.

The President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko expressed his deepest and sincere condolences to the families and friends of those who died in this terrible tragedy. He also advised the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine to set up an Emergency State Commission to investigate the catastrophe together with ICAO and international experts, inviting Dutch and Malaysian representatives to join the investigation efforts.

This is the third such tragedy in recent days following AN-26 and SU-25 aircrafts of the Ukrainian Armed Forces which were shot down from the Russian territory, according to [president.gov.ua](http://president.gov.ua).

The Ukrainian presidential administration has informed that the Armed Forces of Ukraine did not take any actions to strike targets in the air throughout the duration of the Anti-Terrorist Operation in eastern Ukraine. Moreover, there were no Ukrainian Antiaircraft Defense Systems in the area.

The Ukrainian leadership has expressed confidence that those responsible for this tragedy would be brought to justice.

## **Lesson 2.**

### **Truth doesn't matter. Stories do.**

the game. Get some facts, build a story that makes sense, and go tell people before they make up their minds. Our opponents had a simple story: the plane crashed over Ukraine, shot by Ukrainians - the military or the separatists, it doesn't matter. Ukraine is at fault.

The truth was so much more complicated. But in a crisis, people clamor for answers. The information vacuum craves to be filled, truth be damned. Information spreads like wildfire, all nuances invisible in the smoke.

Ukraine didn't have a simple story. We were determined to stick to the facts, but we didn't have all the facts. Moreover, the story we had to tell was so complicated. There was a lot of backstory that people didn't care about at the moment – the revolution, the annexation of Crimea, and, before that, a long story of Ukraine's fight for independence. And here comes the next lesson.

Sad as it may sound, in a crisis, people don't much care about getting to the truth. Speed is the name of

## **Lesson 3.**

### **The simpler story wins.**

information, we're subconsciously choosing the simpler stories over more complicated ones. Having a simple, straightforward story is an enormous advantage. Yet, in reality, truth is never that simple.

So what if your story is not so clear-cut? The answer is consistency and persistence.

Even in on an ordinary day, people don't have the time or the energy to unravel complicated stories. We're so inundated with

## **Lesson 4.**

### **Develop a story and stick to it.**

provided all the information and access it could to the international team. Secondly, Ukraine did not make the fatal shot – it didn't have any anti-aircraft weapons in the area. Thirdly, separatists had to have obtained their missiles from Russia, which at the time claimed it had nothing to do with the conflict in Ukraine.

This story was then very consistently delivered at every opportunity. There was a lot of interest from the international media in the circumstances leading to the MH17 tragedy and its aftermath. We had to use it to make sure our story is heard.

All spokespersons told this same story, supporting it with facts as they became known. Every day, the head of the special investigative commission spoke to the media at UCMC, often bringing other investigators with him. The Prime Minister, the Head of the Security Service – the story was delivered by the highest-ranking officials. No infighting or finger-pointing. Just facts.

Based on the data UCMC was able to collect, a story emerged. First, Ukraine was open to investigation and

## **Lesson 5.**

### **Persistently generate news cycles.**

interest in the story remains high. This goes against the common wisdom, which says to minimize

We needed to make sure we repeated our story again and again. This is why we generated additional news cycles to make sure the

negative news cycles. However, we were in an information war. Our opponents didn't lie back and relax. They threw in more and more outrageous stories. We had to stick to our guns.

We generated a lot of information, which we packaged and repackaged for media usage as well as for the social media. Within seven days since the crash, Ukraine Crisis Media Center sent 228 out press releases to several hundreds of international media outlets and via its Facebook and Twitter accounts. 76 newsmakers, including Ukrainian and foreign government officials and experts spoke to the public about the downing of MH 17 through UCMC. 15 news digests in three foreign languages were distributed to the media.

## Lesson 6.

### Engage stakeholders.

We also needed third parties to contribute. There were a lot of viewpoints and experts, and we gave the floor to anyone who was willing to stick to the facts. We asked experts for their opinions and analysis. They built on the basic story, adding new insights and angles, also helping us generate news cycles.

For instance, we had daily call-ins with the spokesperson of the Special Monitoring Mission of the OSCE – Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe – whose mandate was to monitor that the investigators get access to the crash site and nobody tampers with evidence. Remember that Ukrainian government officials or the media had no access to the crash site at all. So we relied on the spokesperson for the mission to call us via Skype and describe for the media what he saw and experienced.

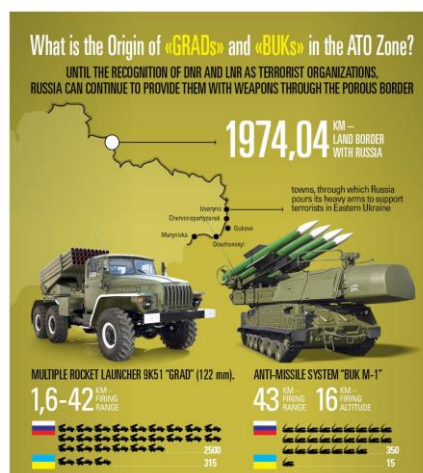


## Lesson 7.

### Package information for easy consumption.

Also, we understood that this barrage of information needs help being digested. We at UCMC were very aware of the trend toward “snackable” content, and therefore repackaged our complicated stories in graphic format. Here are just a few examples of what UCMC did to convey the message that heavy weaponry was still being moved from Russia to Ukraine to aid the terrorists.

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I hope you forgive me for repeating the platitude about crisis being an opportunity. Yet, it was true in this case. In fact, the MH17 tragedy brought the spotlight back to Ukraine and allowed us to highlight a lot of issues relevant to the international community and step up the pressure on Russia, primarily through economic sanctions.

### **Lesson 8.**

**A crisis CAN be an opportunity.**

The international coverage shifted from the single event to its context, and tried to explain to readers what was going on in our part of the

world – all very important in preventing the further escalation of the conflict.

None of this would have been possible without the experience and reputation of the Ukraine Crisis Media Center. It was launched in March 2014 as a shoestring operation, manned by volunteers – some of the best in the profession, but volunteers nevertheless. By time of the MH7 crash, it has secured some funding from international donors and was a rather advanced operation with the facilities and the team to handle this kind of challenge. Plus, UC C already had a significant database of international media and established relations with global media outlets. The government lacked even basic capabilities to cope with the deluge of inquiries from the international media, let alone being able to communicate proactively.

### **Lesson 9.**

**Pre-crisis track of record matters. A lot.**

A crisis is, basically, a test of your readiness and reputation. Crisis readiness is paramount. Having the team,

the skills, the equipment, the plan – all of these are very important. But what matters most, is what kind of track record you have. Are you trustworthy? Do you have the relationships you need with the media and pundits? Do you have the reputational credit history that you can fall back on in tough times?

This group of people are some very exhausted team members and volunteers of the UCMC in the aftermath of the hard work they did to manage the media outreach after the downing of MH17. The responsibility to 298 victims, to our country and to the whole world drove us during this time. We were all weighed down with the enormity of what had happened, and the terrible tragedy that befell almost three hundred innocent people who became victims of someone else's war.



### **Lesson 10.**

**These days, all communications are crisis communications.**

Yet, the team was able to pull this off because they have been doing it for the previous four months. In fact, our work on an everyday basis is not much

different from what we did over those few weeks in July 2014. We still need to be quick, to be

proactive, to deal with competing stories, to engage stakeholders and to create new ways to repackage content for easier consumption. In our information-driven world, all communications are crisis communications.

You only get a short window to communicate your story, and then the world moves on to another story, and you may never get the opportunity to fight back. The days of 24-hour news cycles are over. It's about 24-second news cycles now, and the pressure to deliver has never been higher on communication professionals. Also, the stakes have never been higher. Reputations are built and destroyed in a matter of minutes. These lessons would well be remembered even on relatively quiet days.



I want to finish with this picture. After the crash, thousands of Ukrainians came to the embassies of the Netherlands, Malaysia and Australia – the three countries that lost the most people in the crash. They lit candles and brought flowers. We shared in this tragedy. We were emotionally invested. It fueled us and drove us to know that we were helping bring the truth to light.

The story of MH17 is far from over. No justice has been done to those guilty of this terrible tragedy. Still, I am sure it will happen. It will take a lot of willpower and a lot of communication, but I'm sure the justice will be done.

My deepest condolences to the families and friends of those who perished on MH17.

P.S. Thank you to my fellow communicators – team and volunteers at the [Ukraine Crisis Media Center](http://UkraineCrisisMediaCenter.org). This is your story, your fight and your victory.



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