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Short communication

How the Hong Kong government lost the public trust in SARS: Insights for government communication in a health crisis

Kaman Lee*

School of Journalism and Communication, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the crisis mismanagement of the Hong Kong government during the SARS outbreak. It addresses eight factors that characterize a government crisis and uses them as guidelines to assess how the Hong Kong government performed in SARS.

The Hong Kong government faced a major crisis when SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) broke out in 2003. There was a total of 1755 Hong Kong residents who got infected. The epidemic finally claimed 299 lives, including 6 medical workers. The Hong Kong government’s image and reputation were at stake as local citizens and media accused it of being “impotent” in handling the crisis.

This paper examines the unique characteristics of government crises and uses them as a guideline to demonstrate how the Hong Kong government’s crisis communication lost the public trust in the SARS epidemic.

1. The nature of government communication and government crisis

Helm and his associates (1981)’s work suggests that government public relations is distinguished from corporate public relations in both nature and scope. Especially in times of an acute crisis, the government’s level of responsibility, complexity of communication layers as well as degree of public and media scrutiny often far exceed that of the private sector.

Specifically, eight factors that characterize the uniqueness of a government crisis are identified in this study (Buus & Olsson, 2006; Helm, Hiebert, Naver, & Rabin, 1981; Liu & Horsley, 2007; Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997; Viteritti, 1997): (1) A crisis raises questions about the ineffectiveness of government authorities regarding prevention and containment. (2) A crisis can magnify the existing problem of the government’s devaluation of communication. (3) When a crisis occurs, the media scrutiny intensifies. (4) Government crises and their handlings constitute public’s accumulated collective memories that are used to evaluate against the next government crisis. (5) The public often sees a government crisis as thematic rather than episodic in nature—that is, they evaluate crisis within a broader context (such as a product of the government and its leadership rather than in relation to a specific episode). (6) The public often interprets the government’s crisis communication as a reflection of how much the government prioritizes public good. (7) When a crisis hits, the bureaucratic nature of the

* Tel.: +852 26961907.
E-mail address: kamanleekm@cuhk.edu.hk.
The political, economic and social contexts constitute a powerful external crisis environment that often influences the government’s decision. The distinctive nature of a government crisis has two implications: Firstly, the existing crisis communication frameworks that commonly focus on the analysis of crisis response strategies (e.g., the use of apology, compensation, responsibility acceptance) may not be adequate to address the complexity of a government crisis. Secondly, when a crisis hits, the effectiveness of the government’s crisis communication lies in how well it is able to tackle the eight aforementioned challenges that constitute the unique nature of a government crisis.

2. The 2003 SARS and the Hong Kong government’s crisis mismanagement

The 2003 SARS in Hong Kong constituted an acute emergency for the Hong Kong government to act because the local and international public safety was at great risk. However, the Hong Kong government’s crisis management in SARS was considered the worst among its other counterparts (e.g., the Canada, the Macau and the Singapore governments) (Cheng, 2004). Assessment of its crisis communication finds failure in handling the eight aforementioned challenges effectively. Data consisted of over 3500 news articles from five major newspapers in Hong Kong. Specifically, the Hong Kong government failed in.

2.1. Demonstrating effectiveness of government authorities in prevention/containment

When SARS started to break out in its neighboring Guangdong province in November 2002, the then Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food of the Hong Kong government, Yeoh Eng-kiong told the local media that because “the authorities in China have already said there is no need to be concerned,” there was “no reason why Hong Kong people should be panicking.” When it was verified that there were contracted cases found in Hong Kong, the Department of Health concentrated in locating the virus origin, leaving the containment measures largely ignored.

2.2. Improving its communication management

The director of the Government Information Service (GIS), who was supposedly the Chief Executive's public relations advisor and representative, had remained absent from the scene throughout the SARS crisis. With over 400 staff in the GIS office, there was not one single designated media spokesperson from the unit. The office had been doing little besides updating the daily figures of contracted medical staff every day through press releases.

2.3. Minimizing media scrutiny

The Hong Kong government officials showed little media relation efforts to minimize media scrutiny during the SARS outbreak. The then Secretary for Health, Welfare and Food of the Hong Kong government, Yeoh Eng-kiong scolded the media for “exaggerating the situation” and trying to “scare away all the citizens from the street.” When the reporters complained about the government’s lack of transparency, Yeoh gave no response except two “ha-ha” sniggers.

2.4. Reassuring the public in its ability to take preventive measures in the future

In the midst of the outbreak, the government announced the establishment of an investigative team. However, when being asked when the government could release the investigation results, Yeoh replied that it might take “a few days the shortest or years” to come up with the answers. On 5 May, the day after the number of new infected cases had dropped to a one-digit unit, the government announced allocating $64 million US dollars to fund related research. However, the measure was seen as vain talks because no concrete actions and timetable were suggested.

2.5. Demonstrating strong leadership

The then Chief Executive of the Hong Kong government, Tung Chee Hwa, only made his first show 14 days after the virus broke out in a hospital. He then disappeared again for another 10 days. When asked by the media later why he did not pay a second visit to the hospital, Tung replied that he wanted to, but was “stopped” by his colleagues.

2.6. Demonstrating strong commitment to public good

The Hong Kong government’s economic concern overrode the concern for public safe. When being asked how the public should protect themselves, Yeoh responded coldly that “there was danger in eating, drinking and even breathing, and one’d better not live if one wants to be risk-free.” He insisted that the scenes of muffled, mask-wearing citizens would tarnish the image of Hong Kong and scare the tourists away. When the public asked the Hong Kong government to follow the Singapore
Government officials were inconsistent in their comments and behavior, indicating to the public serious bureaucratic problems and poor communication between government agencies. At the beginning of SARS, the Department of Health issued an announcement that they believed the disease had not spread to the community. Yet, another health care entity in the government, the Hospital Authority, announced that there was such possibility. In the midst of the outbreak, some officials (e.g., Ko Wing-man, the Director of Professional Services and Public Affairs) came out wearing masks, whereas some (e.g., Yeoh) did not. Even at the final stage of the SARS outbreak, the issue of mask wearing was still unsettled. While Henry Tang, the then Secretary for Commerce, Industry and Technology suggested to “burn the masks” to celebrate, Yeoh reminded the public to “keep the mask on” in crowded areas. The inconsistent and anarchic messages reflected a lack of crisis control center and the breakdown of the intra-bureaucratic communications among government units.

2.8. Minimizing the effects of external crisis environment on government decisions

Tung had unnecessarily let the political factor interfere his crisis management decision and action. Upon the outbreak of the deadly SARS epidemic, Tung was hesitant to decide/act without direct instructions from the Beijing government. He only resumed his visibility in the SARS crisis after he was called upon to meet the General Secretary of the Communist Party Hu Jintao at the apex of the outbreak. Tung appeared in the public again after being instructed publicly by Hu to “put citizens’ health and well-being as the highest priority.” He suddenly became active after the Beijing government publicly praised the neighboring Macau for implementing preventive measures efficiently and fired the health minister and the mayor of Beijing for mishandling the SARS crisis.

To conclude, eight challenges that characterize a government crisis have been identified in this paper. The Hong Kong government failed in its crisis management in SARS for failing to tackle these challenges effectively.

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