

Making Myths of Airplane Crashes: How News Media Frame Airplane Crashes

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On March 8, 2014 Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 disappeared and has yet to be found, the 239 occupants presumed dead. July 17, 2014 Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 crashed after being shot down over the Ukraine-Russia border by Russian Militants, killing 298 people. A few months later, on December 28, 2014, Indonesia AirAsia Flight 8501 crashed into the Java Sea due to harsh weather conditions, killing all 162 people on board. Most recently, Germanwings Flight 9525 crashed into the French Alps on March 24, 2015 killing all 150 people on board. In this instance, it appears the co-pilot intentionally crashed the airplane. In barely over a year's time, the world has witnessed four horrific instances of the loss of human life. The news media have covered these stories extensively. From updating the public about the search and rescue efforts to investigating who is to blame for the crashes, the news media have fulfilled their role to the public by providing as much information as possible. Yet, in these instances where one of the world's most trusted and taken for granted technologies, the airplane, have been involved, is it possible to simply *report* the information? Winch (2005) argues "news is understood to be an imperfect view of world events simply because journalism can never be completely objective; it is a human enterprise" (p. 285). In this context, it is impossible for journalists to simply report the events.

In a slightly different approach to Winch (2005), it can be argued reporting is not possible because it is not what the consumer audience wants. With the initial disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, it was as if a sick joke was being played on the entire world. How is it possible for a plane to disappear with the technological advances of the day? This is a question the public demanded the news media investigate and answer and with each additional plane crash the news media has taken up the responsibility of framing these stories in a way the public can comprehend.

Framing is often used in discussing news media reporting. Gamson and Modigliani (1987) explain that a frame is a "central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning" (p. 143). Pan and Kosicki (1993) describe framing as a "strategy of constructing and processing news" in a way that reflects and operates in "shared beliefs," "meanings," and "stories" of the intended audiences (p. 56-60). To appropriately frame the horrifying and unbelievable events of the four airplane incidents, news media

have had to adopt a frame method through which their audiences can resonate with. The aim of this research is analyze relevant news media sources and decipher the characteristic of the framing techniques adopted by reporters and journalists in the last year and the proximity of these four airplane crashes provides a time frame for a content analysis.

Literature Review

Framing and News Media

Durham (1998) explains “when successfully employed, as they generally are, frames make the world a more knowable and understandable” (p.100). According to Berkowitz (2005), the more “unusual and unexpected” an event is, the more journalists seek to explain it in a way that is “relatively familiar” (p. 608). The motive behind this method is the ability to make their stories better resonate with their respective audiences. Frames represent “ideological” positions and “social narratives” through which journalism “create meaning” (Durham 1998, p. 105). Stories with particularly horrific content, such as plane crashes or terrorist attacks, need a frame through which journalists can provide some type of meaning in order to aid their audience in understanding and coping with the event. Fuglsang (2001) argues that journalists rely on “readily understood, interpretive frames” found in “ritual, myth, and metaphor” in order to develop frames (p. 185).

Framing is also considered in term of storytelling (Christopher, 2007; Durham, 1998; Andsager, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Bird, 1990). Journalist take on the role as storytellers and in this role they attempt to resonate their works with the everyday life of their audience (Berkowitz 2005, p. 607). Additionally, Christopher (2007) explains that with new multimedia technology, journalists “become managers of information rather than just gatherers” (p. 6). This suggests that there is an art to storytelling in news media which allows for journalists to cultivate a story to the public. As the story develops, so does the audience’s relationship with the news media. There is a reliance factor at play with news media framing.

Framing has been applied to discussions of airplane crashes before. In a 1996 article, Marks examines the news media’s attempt to establish a frame to report the crash of TWA Flight 800. Durham

also discusses the failed attempts of news media to cohesively frame the crash (Durham 2005). In a separate and later incident, Dettmer (2001) discusses how the news media attempted to frame the crash of American Airlines Flight 587 as a terrorist attack as this fit with the current audience's understanding of plane crashes as this occurred closely after the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center. When this proved wrong, Dettmer describes television news commentators struggling to break from this frame (Dettmer 2001). It is interesting to note that the news media struggled to find a frame for airplane crashes prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, but post-9/11 immediately adopted the terrorist frame.

Framing Through Myth

As briefly mentioned, news media and journalists often find groundwork for their frames in myth (Fuglsang 2001). Berkowitz (2005) describes a common structure of a frame is through mythic archetypes. In his article on the phenomenon of female suicide bombers, Berkowitz (2005) explains how news media adopted the mythic archetype of the Woman Warrior to frame these women for the western audience. Because myths are "culturally resonant" for both the journalist and their audience, framing stories through myths adds "an element of value" (Berkowitz 2005, p. 608). In regard to female suicide bombers who, like airplane crashes, are a "sheer contradiction" to the status quo of the everyday life, framing through myth allows for journalists to tell their story in a context that their audience is capable of understanding (Berkowitz 2005, p. 610). Winch (2005) illustrates how the news media developed bin Laden into an "evil genius mythical archetype" which supported multiple storytelling facets including a way for news media to side step discussion of flawed U.S. foreign policy and provide "rational explanation for seemingly irrational acts that would not make [audiences] feel uncomfortable" (Winch 2005, p. 296-7). Depicting him as an evil genius also allowed for an excuse as to why no one in U.S. intelligence agencies were aware of the attack or able to prevent it (Winch 2005, p. 297). Both Berkowitz (2005) and Winch (2005) illustrate the practice of news media to use myth to frame difficult events and topics which allows for easier discussion. This research will be continue with this approach to analyze the way news media has framed the four recent airplane crashes indicated.

Research Questions

Following the research of Durham (1998), who analyzed news media coverage of Flight 800 case in terms of framing, this research project is interested in looking at the news media coverage of the four airplane crashes in terms of framing through myth. Considering the literature analyzed, these news incidents meet the qualifications for being framed through myth and mythic archetypes. Based on the close time proximity of the four airplane crashes to one another, and to the start of this research, this is a very relevant topic that warrants analysis. Additionally, the prior research conducted on the topic of news media framing through myth supports the initial hypotheses of this endeavor:

H: The content analysis will show evidence of mythic framing regarding the four airplane crash incidents. This evidence will contain multiple levels of significance which will be coded by researchers.

RQ1: What appears to be the rhetorical intent behind news coverage of the airplane crashes that display framing elements of myth and mythical archetypes?

RQ2: How are the pilots of each air plane framed through myth or mythical archetypes? Specifically regarding responsibility and blame for the incidents. If so, is this framing positive, negative, or neutral?

RQ3: What evidence is present of frame development from the first airplane disappearance, Malaysia Flight 370, to the most recent crash, Germanwings Flight 9525?

RQ4: How has post 9/11 mythic framing influenced news coverage of the four plane incidents? Are there elements such as terrorist plots, the religious fanatic, or Trickster archetypes?

Method

This research study initially set out to code the four airplane crashes discussed, starting with the initial coverage of Malaysia Flight 370 and the most recent coverage available on Germanwings Flight 9525. Based on the pilot study and emergent coding, it was decided the Malaysia Flight 17 needed to be removed from the study as the coding results indicated it did not fit with the other flights due to the nature

of the crash. Malaysia was shot down, whereas the cause of the three other flight crashes was due to pilot choices or weather, or a combination.

For each of the airplane crash incidents, coverage of the initial event and aftermath will be examined from both print and broadcast news sources. Because each crash has independent characteristics and circumstances, judgment will be made on the part of the researchers to set a time line for each airplane's coverage, but the intended boundary is a month's time span from the initial crash to the last piece of news coverage examined. Because this research is looking at three different incidents individually and as a connected phenomenon, this boundary of one month will not include coverage of a previous incident that is revisited within the discussion of later airplane crash.

It is the goal of the researchers to examine three print sources and three broadcast sources for each incident. Initial research will optimistically provide more than the set amount for each incident, which will allow for the researchers to randomly choose three print sources and three broadcast sources. The sampling of news sources was purposive. The major broadcast news networks were sampled: Cable News Network (CNN), Fox News, and NBC News. For print coverage articles were sampled from the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and USA Today. These news sources were selected because they are easily accessible to both the researchers and the general public. For the video sources, researchers watched the videos and coded while watching. With the ease of access thanks to online technology, there was little difficulty finding news coverage recordings.

Emergent coding was the primary method for researchers. Based on previous studies on similar content the categories for this research are defined as news coverage which uses mythic framing to report airplane crashes. The unit of analysis was any statement made by a journalist or news reporter and element of a news coverage (such as captions, images, and additional text that accompany the news story) that includes elements of myth, such as mythic archetypes, mythical historical reference, allegory, or mythic sensationalization. These were measured by number of occurrence in each story. Researchers will look for mythic framing of the incident as whole, mythic framing of the pilots, and potential post-9/11 mythic framing.

Through the pilot study and emergent coding technique, researchers defined six content categories for the research. The first was “Pilot” which was defined as any reference to the pilot or co-pilot of the plane. Second, “Search Efforts,” which was defined as any reference to search and rescue procedures taking place. Third, “Theory behind crash,” any reference to a reasoning as to why the plane went missing. Fourth, “Family contact,” any reference to contact of the families of the passengers or flight crew aboard the plane. Fifth, “similar events,” any reference to any other missing plane or plane crash. Last, “other,” was included as any other theme found in the research that was considered significant. Anything coded in the “other” category was discussed between coders to confirm relevance. After content was coded it was then determined to be either mythic or non-mythic. Mythic refers to any statement that includes mythological metaphors, similes, or stereotypes. Non-mythic refers to any statement that does not include mythological metaphors, similes, or stereotypes.

Because the researchers did not want to enter this project with a specific mythological frame in mind, this unit of analysis is defined only by elements that are associate with myths. If initial research is shown to have standout mythic frame elements then these will be pursued more purposefully. Known Greek and Roman myths, Jungian archetypes, and other storytelling themes/archetypes provided the main context for interpreting the coding. The background research on this topic supports belief there will be categories present that utilize myth, but to what extent will be determined through the content research.

Results and Discussion

Of the 248 items that were coded, 163 of them were decided by coders to be mythic. The data was ran through a contingency table and then a Pearson Chi-Square test was conducted which resulted in a .002 significance level. This supports the hypothesis of this study that there would be evidence of mythic framing in the content of news media stories of recent airplane crashes. The categories which had the largest amount of mythic framing elements were the “Pilot,” “Theory Behind Crash,” “Search Efforts,” and “Other” categories. Because the “Other” category had 53 items, 44 of which were determined to be mythic, future research would need to develop more specific categories which would cover the content coded as “Other.” Though the results were not significant when the data was run

through both Pearson Chi-Square test and a Phi (Φ) test, the contingency table did show that print news outlets had more elements of mythic framing than the broadcast content. This indicates a possible approach in future research to further explore a possible correlation between mythic framing and news outlet.

Holsti's formula was utilized to calculate intercoder reliability. There were a total of 577 items coded amongst all coders. After discussion and review, 248 of the coded items were agreed upon. The formula came to $496 / 577$. This result produced a .8596 intercoder reliability.

It was felt by all coders that the rhetorical motivation behind the use of mythic framing was to provide viewers/readers context through which they could understand the tragedies. This conclusion was supported by the context of the use of mythic framing and the development of the news stories surrounding each crash. These findings support prior research which indicates the use of framing in news media reporting as a way to provide relevance and context to viewers/readers. Based on the results, coders agreed the mythic framing regarding the "Pilot" category appeared to be moving toward framing the pilots involved in the crashes through the "rogue pilot" archetype. Both of the content for Malaysia Flight 370 and AirAsia Flight 8501 indicated the attempt for the development of the "rogue pilot" archetype, but it was not until the crash of the Germanwings Flight that this archetype fully emerged in the current frame of airplane crashes. The Germanwings Flight reports included evidence which support the claims the pilot intentionally crashed the plane into the side of a mountain. The "rogue pilot" archetype did appear in both of the other crashes' content, though with less definitive claims by media as continued speculation around the cause of the crashes prevents confirmation of the pilots be completely at fault. This being said, the rhetoric surrounding discussion of the pilots involved in the crashes was characterized by deep speculation, exploration of background of each pilot, and attempts to determine possible motives for the purposeful crash of the airplanes, all which indicated the mythic framing to be negative toward the pilots.

The content coded indicated similar approaches of framing regarding Malaysia Flight 370 and AirAsia Flight 8501. This is likely due to the consistencies between the two crashes. The eventual discovery of the remains of AirAsia Flight 8501 served to expand the mythic frame surrounding Malaysia

Flight 370, which has yet to be found. When the search efforts were discussed in the content of both Malaysia Flight 370 and AirAsia Flight 8501, the content supported mythic framing which borrowed on metaphors of the “Hero’s/Impossible Journey” metaphor that is a large part of both historic and contemporary mythic narratives. Repeated elements included reference to the danger of the search, the treacherous weather and ocean conditions, and the difficulty finding these planes in the ocean. The ongoing failure to find Malaysia Flight 370 further develops the mythic framing as the failure of technology and search efforts support the metaphor used to discuss this event.

Regarding relationship to post-911 framing, each initial coverage of the crashes contained content which referenced speculation of terrorist plot or responded to questions about terrorism. The mythic framing of the pilots as “rogue pilot” archetype carries connotations similar to archetype used to discuss suicide bombers, the Trickster (Berkowitz 2005) and the “Evil Genius” archetype adopted by media for Osama bin Laden (Winch 2005). All three of these archetypes are treated with negative framing techniques that serve to undermine the subject’s mental stability and sense of reason.

Conclusion

Due to the proximity of these three airplane crash incidents, the resultant heightened public awareness and paranoia surrounding these incidents justifies the news media’s development of understandable and resonant frame technique that allowed journalists and reporters to bring a semblance of meaning to their audience. This research was designed to begin the discussion of the correlation between mythic framing and airplane crash reporting, and has successfully done so. Future research is open to further pursue the significance of the use of mythic framing regarding airplane crashes, and also investigate other avenues of connected research, such as any correlation between news source and use of mythic framing. The results of this study add to the existing literature which discusses the methods of news media reporting. The results of this study expand knowledge of news media sources adopting mythic frames in their coverage the world-wide crisis situations of the four airplane crashes. This research can be applied to future studies of crisis situation reporting, including how crises that affect multiple countries are covered.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Table 1
Story Content and Myths

Category Issue		Mythological Theme		Total
		Myth	Non-Myth	
Pilot	Count	36	10	46
	%	78.3	21.7	100.0
Search Efforts	Count	26	26	46
	%	56.5	43.5	100.0
Theory	Count	39	26	65
	%	60.0	40.0	100.0
Family Contact	Count	8	8	16
	%	50.0	50.0	100.0
Similar Events	Count	10	12	22
	%	45.5	54.5	100.0
Other	Count	44	9	53
	%	83.0	17.0	100.0
Total	Count	163	85	248
	%	65.7	34.3	100.0

Table 2
News Outlet and Myth

News Outlet		Mythological Theme		Total
		Myth	Non-Myth	
Broadcast	Count	68	41	109
	%	62.4	37.6	100.0
Print	Count	95	44	139
	%	68.3	31.7	100.0
Total	Count	163	85	248
	%	65.7	34.3	100.0

Appendix B

Intercoder Reliability

	Items Agreed On	Items Coded 1	Items Coded 2
	9	9	10
	19	20	20
	10	11	12
	9	10	10
	14	14	16
	10	11	12
	6	7	7
	13	14	14
	4	5	5
	18	20	19
	2	4	3
	5	5	6
	12	13	15
	4	5	8
	8	9	10
	7	8	9
	5	5	7
	8	9	11
	3	5	4
	2	3	4
	9	11	11
	25	28	26
	5	7	7
	8	11	11
	6	8	7
	18	21	19
	5	6	5
	4	5	5
Total:	248	284	293
Holsti's:	496	577	0.859618718

Holsti's Formula: $(2 M) / (N1 + N2) = R$
 $(2 * 248) / (284 + 293)$
 $496 / 577 = .8596$
 $R = .8596$

Appendix C**Code Book: Making Myths of Airplane Crashes**

Please use one coding sheet for each story analyzed. If the story contains more than 90 ideas of interest, use a second coding sheet and clearly mark the pages accordingly (1 of 2/ 2 of 2).

For each story record the date and the headline provided. Continue by marking if the story was a video broadcast or a print story. Next, mark the airplane crash analyzed and the media outlet of the story. As the coder, mark your name so the sheet can be identified. Leave the SPSS Case Range empty until the data is entered into SPSS.

The unit of analysis is a statement. A statement contains a complete thought with a subject, verb, and predicate. Analyze each statement and code it based on two variables: content and mythological frame.

Read each statement in the story and determine if it fits into one of the six content categories. The six categories are defined as follows:

1. Pilot - Any reference to the pilot or co-pilot of the plane.
2. Search efforts - Any reference to search and rescue procedures taking place.
3. Theory behind crash - Any reference to a reasoning as to why the plane went missing.
4. Family contact - Any reference to contact of the families of the passengers or flight crew aboard the plane.
5. Similar events - Any reference to any other missing plane or plane crash.
6. Other - Any other theme you find prevalent.

After you have coded a statement for content, mark if the statement included mythological themes as follows:

1. Mythic - The statement includes any mythological metaphors, similes, or stereotypes.
2. Non-mythic - The statement does not include any mythological metaphors, similes, or stereotypes.
3. Unsure - The coder is unsure if the theme is mythological.

After the coding statements, consult with the other coder to be sure intercoder reliability is reached.

If you have any questions, contact Emily Ronquillo, 702-526-2092.

Making Myths of Airplane Crashes

Comm 6030, Spring 2015

Date _____ Headline _____

Video | M-370 G-9525 | CNN Fox NBC NYT USA Today LA Times

Print | M-17 A-8501 | Coombs Dearman Ronquillo SPSS Case Range _____

	Issue	Myth		Issue	Myth		Issue	Myth
1			31			61		
2			32			62		
3			33			63		
4			34			64		
5			35			65		
6			36			66		
7			37			67		
8			38			68		
9			39			69		
10			40			70		
11			41			71		
12			42			72		
13			43			73		
14			44			74		
15			45			75		
16			46			76		
17			47			77		
18			48			78		
19			49			79		
20			50			80		
21			51			81		
22			52			82		
23			53			83		
24			54			84		
25			55			85		
26			56			86		
27			57			87		
28			58			88		
29			59			89		
30			60			90		