

It's about the media, not the plane

By ABC's Stephen McDonell

Updated 1 hour 46 minutes ago

With no new information but a 24-hour news cycle to fill, reporters have made themselves the star of the story for the missing Malaysian Airlines passenger jet, writes Stephen McDonell.

The drama around the missing Malaysian Airlines passenger jet has attracted enormous attention. There has been almost around-the-clock coverage of the search though often with very little solid information to report on.

That, however, has not stopped the world's media outlets going into considerable detail about all manner of theories as to circumstances of the disappearance and potential reasons for it. And, when in doubt, make the reporter the story.

"Never forget that we are the story," Aaron Altman sarcastically quipped to Tom Grunick in *Broadcast News*. His nemesis had teared up in a cut-away of the reporter listening sensitively to a date rape victim. We learn later, of course, that this was acting.

The movie captured the moment in the 1980s when the big American TV Networks really dumbed down the news and made personalities out of their presenters.

Fast forward to now and the transformation has spread around the planet.

The hunt for the missing passenger jet has understandably generated massive international interest.



PHOTO: The missing flight MH370 has revealed the shortcomings of world mass media.
(Reuters: Damir Sagolj)

The problem has been that most days here there has been nothing new to report, with the exception of a couple of major shifts like when it emerged that the aircraft had gone off on a completely different direction or when Australia announced a strong lead from satellite images.

This has been especially challenging for the likes of CNN, keen to broadcast 24 hours a day on a story with no news.

This theory ... that theory ... this expert ... that expert ...

At one point I heard them promoting an item coming up looking at other great mysteries "like what happened to Marilyn Monroe and..."

Listen to Stephen McDonnell's report

Are you serious: Marilyn Monroe? World's great mysteries? Is there nothing else happening? Never forget that we are the story.

AUDIO: MH370 (Correspondents Report)

The ABC's China correspondent details how the world's media is covering the missing plane on Correspondents Report.

CNN studio presenter Bill Weir held up a photo of a child who was on board the missing flight. He referred to the child's age in the present tense because, Bill told us, he's not giving up hope that the child is still alive.

Gee thanks, Bill, we the viewers are now enriched with the knowledge that you're not giving up hope.

Richard Quest was interviewing the father of a passenger who was on board the Air France flight that crashed into the ocean prompting a search for the black box that took two years.

In asking how the families coped at the time, Richard added that he was covering this story back in 2009. He acknowledged that he, of course, was one step removed from the families in all this.

What? Are you implying that it's even remotely relevant how hard it was for you to cope with this in the studio from where you reported on this missing flight?

Yet the really cringe-worthy aspect to the coverage of this crisis has been the grandstanding of television networks here at the MH370 media centre.

Although the press conferences are going out live across the world in who knows how many countries on who knows how many networks, here is how Sky News starts its questions in these briefings.

"You're live on Sky News London and our thoughts are very much with your countrymen at very difficult time."

The belief is clearly that the self-promotion of "you're live on Sky News London" is somehow less cold and self-serving if the thoughts of Sky News are with the Transport Minister's countrymen.

Britain's ITV has taken it upon themselves to demand an apology for the families. At the press conference immediately after Chinese relatives of the missing burst into the media centre to protest, they proudly re-asked the same question of the Transport Minister:

"We asked you on Monday if you thought the time was now to apologise to the families. After what we witnessed this afternoon, is the time not really now?"

Hishammuddin Hussein responded: "The time is still to look for the aircraft."

These are questions designed for TV reporters to be seen to be asking the tough questions for networks who think their audiences are stupid at a time when there is no news.

Here's France 24 going straight after the Transport Minister: "What consequences can these mistakes have on your administration? Can you confirm to us that you are Prime Minister Najib's cousin? Are you protected by him?"

Malaysian reporters thought this was pretty hilarious given that this family relationship is hardly a secret here.

The Transport Minister seemed to think it was reasonably funny too.

Over the laughter in the room he looked perplexed and asked: "Where are you from?"

France 24: "France".

Transport Minister: "Yes, I can confirm here that Najib is my cousin. I don't know what I am supposed to be protected from."

The mock outrage, the theories, the false empathy - they can't lose.

The hard thing for all of us though has been to admit at various times that there has been simply nothing new to say.

Yet the nature of these mass international stories has changed forever. Journalists will file a piece based on thin air.

And some of them, with nothing to write about, will even descend into the navel gazing exercise of analysing how other media outlets are reporting.

Stephen McDonell is the ABC's China correspondent and has been covering the investigation from the MH370 media centre in Kuala Lumpur. View his full profile here.

Topics: media, internet-culture, information-and-communication

First posted 2 hours 49 minutes ago

Comments (33)

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Isla:

24 Mar 2014 10:42:00am

Thankyou Stephen, very succinct article. Our family are very concerned about a weekend report about an RAAF pilot reported as a "hottie" by News.com. Tasteless and unempathic reporting in the face of the grief and suffering of the families awaiting news we think ! It is clear that "news" source was struggling to fill their space.

Reply Alert moderator

Dove:

24 Mar 2014 11:25:18am

The hottness of the pilot is more newsworthy than someone in a control room explaining the rationale of the search. File footage of people manually throwing sonar bouys out the back of a completely different aircraft is more important than explaining how the search is being conducted. The patriotic fact that this is now an Australian effort is more important than the tragedy itself. The endless talking heads of dubious expertise and leading questions from TV hosts who can barely read and autcue is more important than any sober analysis. It's a circus. It's trying to be entertainment. It's not even meant to be news.

Reply Alert moderator

Isla:

24 Mar 2014 12:03:21pm

Are people so vacuous as to accept that "hottie" story ? If they are we are in really deeper trouble than I thought.

Reply Alert moderator

24 Mar 2014 12:12:12pm

Elvis:

Spot on, Dove - while I'll get howled down only the ABC could be deemed to actually provide a news service these days. The commercial stations "fill" their services with cross-promotion and waffle such as covered in this article

[Reply](#) [Alert moderator](#)

24 Mar 2014 12:20:01pm

brad:

Yes, commercial media should only run refugee sob stories and blatant lies made up by the Guardian

[Reply](#) [Alert moderator](#)

24 Mar 2014 10:48:35am

muzz:

True. The editors and owners of this personalised rubbish are the culprits here too. Expect rubbish and you will get it. The reporters here are almost the victims but who will show the moral courage to not promote this rubbish news reporting?

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24 Mar 2014 10:51:52am

Sinekal:

The media invented relevance deprivation so its hardly surprising they suffer from attempts to cure it. Soon we will find one of the passengers lived next door to a person whose brother in law died in the attack on the World Trade Center.

Crossing to their own staff at another live location to give an idea that they are both experts and in touch. The pictures they get provided with will be in their studio not the verge of an airfield. Importance and sincerity are early targets.

Lithium batteries ?? Pfff Anyone with two lumps of rabbit droppings for brains knows that every commercial aircraft flying has hundreds of them on board. Many of them turned on and in use. Yes folks... the passengers themselves with laptops, tablets, phones etc all capable of failure. Whose going to suggest they are all removed before flight?

An Australian military person talking about a 24 metre piece of debris as possibly being a shipping container... wrong !! Shipping containers are a maximum 12 metres long although over dimension cargo may well be bigger.

A wooden pallet with straps... there is only many thousands of them floating around off fishing and cargo vessels as well as washed out to sea from any one of about 10 countries bordering the Indian ocean. Wooden pallets in a passenger aircraft will be strapped and netted down to an aircraft cargo unit. For them to float free is of course (remotely) possible, but without other buoyant aircraft debris to be seen ? All piffle the

media pump out without checking or considering the accuracy.

Its all about "Look at us we are first and we care more and better than everyone else"

Reply Alert moderator

big joe:

24 Mar 2014 11:21:01am

Do they use wooden pallets on aircraft?, I would have thought that they would be too heavy and lightweight aluminium ones would be used.

Reply Alert moderator

Old-sailor:

24 Mar 2014 11:25:37am

Shipping containers lock together, top to bottom, end to end. If two are floating together, you have 24 metres.

Maybe, just maybe, the Navy know what they're talking about.

Reply Alert moderator

Reader:

24 Mar 2014 11:08:38am

The worst is when news sites run those "How [our outlet] broke the story" retrospectives - sometimes on the same day that the event happened/started!

Reply Alert moderator

Dave:

24 Mar 2014 1:00:39pm

Frank Zappa wrote a brilliant song about this phenomenon called 'Trouble Every Day'. Here's some lyrics:

"You know I watch that rotten box / Until my head begin to hurt / From checkin' out the way / The newsmen say they get the dirt / Before the guys on channel so and so / And further they assert / That any show they litter up / They bring you news if it comes up / They say that if the place blows up / They will be the first to tell / Cause the boys they got downtown / Are working hard and doin swell / And if anybody gets the news / Before it hits the streets / They say that no one blabs it faster / Their coverage can't be beat / And if another woman driver / Gets machine gunned from her seat / They'll send some joker with a brownie / And youll see it all complete."

Bad news is this song turns 50 next year. It's from Zappa's first (and very brilliant) album 'Freak Out'. This problem won't change any time soon we can guarantee it.

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Look at me:

24 Mar 2014 11:38:52am

Our PM & his deputy have bought into the "news" which" may or may not " have anything to add re the missing plane too.

Reply Alert moderator

Lee:

24 Mar 2014 12:33:58pm

Spot on mate, and your moniker here is very apt indeed.

Our PM, in his 'look at me' moments (every bloody day and I for one am sick of it) has described grainy satellite images as "credible evidence" and "significant developments" when, in fact, they are points of interest to be explored.

This sort of exaggerated emphasis only serves to encourage the "sound bite" and "headline" mentality of our so called news outlets and me thinks it is simply self promotion so as to place oneself at the forefront of the daily news.

These kinds of statements and associated news headlines do not help and are, in fact, very misleading and somewhat reprehensible considering the anguish the families are already feeling.

Reply Alert moderator

Jasper:

24 Mar 2014 12:56:57pm

The PM and deputy have been disgracefully using this tragedy for political mileage.

Reply Alert moderator

bide and fecht:

24 Mar 2014 11:39:50am

Until the media sets a higher expectation for itself, we're doomed to be presented with drivel.....Does the public really expect to be presented with minute by minute descriptions of a process that takes hours? No I think thats a media expectation, certainly not one I want, need or expect.

Reply Alert moderator

Amewsed:

24 Mar 2014 11:40:49am

"And some of them, with nothing to write about, will even descend into the navel gazing exercise of analysing how other media outlets are reporting." Thanks for the chortle.

Reply Alert moderator

MJLC:

Thank you Amewsed, thank you.

It seems this article has been filed and published early - I'm guessing it was only supposed to appear next Tuesday.

[Reply](#) [Alert moderator](#)

24 Mar 2014 11:49:22am

Seano:

"At the press conference immediately after Chinese relatives of the missing burst into the media centre to protest, they proudly re-asked the same question of the Transport Minister:"

If the 158 missing Chinese were as uncivilised as their relatives, maybe there was a good reason why someone decided to do the world a favour? As for the journos and the incessant media reports, it's that same old sad story - don't let logic impose on the emotional value they can squeeze out of every second of air time. At least the 'experts' have finally gotten around to letting us all know that 22-24 metric metres does not convert to 40 imperial feet. Now the reporters are delving into the physical properties of wooden pallets and the unreliability of Archimedes' Principle. This is news to some of us who paid too much attention in school.

Given that the 777-200 apparently had fuel for 7 hours, and that the rough average speed is around 1,000km/h we get 7,000km which, if we assume the NNE->W->S course presented by the media, there's roughly 1,000km from KL via Gulf of Thailand to the turning point in the Andaman/Bengal seas and another 6,000km to the current search area/s, so if that's the way the bird has flown, they're spot on for range, but what rational being would set a southerly course knowing that even Antarctica was out of range?

IF the search area is correct, the plane was on autopilot before it crossed the Equator, or being flown by a madman. It ran out of avgas and possibly succumbed to gravity as some things have been know to do at times. If there were survivors, they'd need to have survival devices, and one would imagine perhaps flares? They'd have seen or heard a plane or ship somewhere by now and fired a flare or two to get attention.

Uncouth relatives aside, I wish these things didn't happen. but they're dead. Maybe it's time for the media and the misguided relatives to lay off, scale down the search, and try to accept the reality, and allow the grieving to proceed. There are a lot of living people in Malaysia, China, Thailand, Vietnam and Australia who could make good use of the money being wasted on the massive and fruitless search.

A system to take control of an aircraft from the ground by remote control to fly to preselected safe landing grounds when a pilot or passenger/s hijack these contraptions probably should have been invented decades ago. Nobody should be forced to trust in the kindness of strangers just to get from one place to another.

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24 Mar 2014 12:17:31pm

Elvis:

Seano - I suspect the "uncivilized" Chinese people are simply working off of what they'd get from their government (and dare I say it, Tony's mob) - nothing. Hence the doubts in their minds.

Reply Alert moderator

24 Mar 2014 12:27:04pm

Isla:

Media lay off Seano ? That's just what this article is wishing. It's about concern the people not the plane. Media has no empathy any more which makes it very unhealthy narcissistic and self-obsessed. That's the issue now.

Reply Alert moderator

24 Mar 2014 12:02:24pm

GraemeF:

Isn't Tony Abbott the star of the search?

Reply Alert moderator

24 Mar 2014 12:13:27pm

Jay Somasundaram:

There are two serious aspects to this media frenzy.

Firstly, it exacerbates a public fear of flying. This repetitive bombardment heightens anxiety to the point that it becomes traumatic and damages the psyche.

Secondly, I want to know that governments have rapidly plugged the security holes that have become apparent. Can people with stolen passports still get on international flights? What escalation protocols are in place internationally when a transponder is switched off? We have spent a lot on security. even of domestic flights. Should we be checking ID?

Reply Alert moderator

24 Mar 2014 12:56:10pm

Lee:

Your second point only goes to prove your first point Jay.

Reply Alert moderator

24 Mar 2014 12:14:22pm

Matt:

Watched the movie Anchorman 2 the other day. Pretty ridiculous. But its redeeming feature was that it touched upon the same issues you are writing about here. The dumbing down of the news. It satirised things very well.

Although the news was always pretty dumb, ha, ha, HG Wells and Howard Zinn are a couple of writers who were rather witty in the ways they passed comment on that. Maybe

older people like to think it was better in the past, when it was a major source of information for people, the type Wells and Zinn critique would not like to think what they 'know' is questionable. Some generations are like that in general.

Anyway, recognition of the most disturbing trends of our times seems to be growing.

Reply Alert moderator

Press Releases Ignored:

24 Mar 2014 12:15:13pm

What we are told is SO controlled. Media Releases on important topics have been completely ignored as precedence is given to the NO NEWS about a missing plane. Victoria's Corrections Minister released a Press Release on 12 March, saying how he is improving the Corrections system in respect of the most dangerous criminals and not even one article has been written about it. Not even on the ABC. So is the ABC following? or leading? Newspapers have been trying to become magazines, spouting rubbish gossip as 'news'. Papers of the 1880s-1890s were FAR more informative and the readers were FAR less educated! If you want to be informed you have to search elsewhere - try reading Australian Policy Online web site

Reply Alert moderator

Steve F:

24 Mar 2014 12:21:49pm

I'm surprised that I haven't seen, heard or read somewhere on MSM yet that Tony Abbott or the previous ALP government have a hand in this mystery,

Reply Alert moderator

whatif:

24 Mar 2014 12:24:34pm

Its a shame that every one jumps onto the band wagon in a tragedy and this is a real tragedy with real people and crew on board most likely dead by now, I do believe that one day they will find out what happened, but in the meantime it saddens me to see a pilots name sullied by those clutching at straws. It's happened, nothing can change that, all we can do is hope that it is found soon and the black box can be recovered and the truth made known. Where ever they are, God Bless them all.

Reply Alert moderator

The Jones Crusher:

24 Mar 2014 12:38:28pm

It's the culmination of a plan for world domination by the media barons. By replacing the church as the focal point of social interaction and (a)moral guidance they are able to control the way the misinformed masses will vote.

Reply Alert moderator

anote:

24 Mar 2014 12:45:11pm

The story is clearly of interest but ...

There is no good reason (as yet) to beat up Malaysian Airlines for it; maybe the Malaysian government if they have withheld information but that 'if' blown out of proportion as well.

Lawyers have been shown to be salivating over potential litigation, for something Malaysian Airlines was probably not reasonably blameworthy.

Despite the unusual nature of the incident it is diverting attention from other issues of more importance. Even the likelihood that sodomy charges against Anwar Ibrahim are a trumped abuse of justice by the Malaysian Government that will impact adversely on much more numerous people could fit that point.

Information cannot be created from nothing and no credible argument has been mounted that more could have been reasonably expected to have been know.

It is a kind of mass hysteria.

Reply Alert moderator

Mick:

24 Mar 2014 12:52:35pm

Truss claims that Australia are "clutching at information" on the missing plane, but it's more like the politicians are "clutching" at airtime over this.

It has been nothing short of disgusting that the PM and others have been trying to "milk" attention and publicity from the plight of others in this way.

It should be experts and senior RAAF personnel that brief the media, not politicians attempting to profit from every little bit of this tragedy.

Reply Alert moderator

Gone to the races:

24 Mar 2014 12:53:24pm

The best media headline so far in this search for the missing plane was "Malaysia Airlines Expands Investigation To Include General Scope Of Space, Time"

The airline confirmed it had expanded its active search area to include a several-hundred-square-mile zone in the Indian Ocean as well as each of the seven or 22 additional spatial dimensions posited by string theory. Hmmm?

Could a parallel universe have immediately swelled up from random cosmological fluctuation according to the multiverse theory and swallowed the flight into its folds, or could ice have built up on an airspeed sensor? These are both options. Everything should be on the table. That is, insofar as anything exists at all.

Reply Alert moderator

Jungle Boy:

24 Mar 2014 12:55:14pm

What's interesting is the questions that journalists are NOT asking.

For example, given that the 'war on terror' was precipitated by planes going off course (and flying into the twin towers), why is it still so easy for planes to go way off course?

Reply Alert moderator

EvilGenius:

24 Mar 2014 12:59:34pm

For a number of years, especially with the major corporate news services, there has been a shift from reporting the news to following the story.

Just think on that for a moment and consider the implications. Reporting the news means reporting facts that are [preferably] verifiable by a professional journalist who is dedicated to reporting the truth of the matter. Today though its the story that is tantamount. The story is based on an event but is then spun, moulded, twisted by hack journo's and editors to suit what ever agenda they think will sell more copy.

The people responsible for this are the press barons of fleet street, Robert Maxwell and Rupert Murdoch.

You have to look further afield than the corporate shrills to find true news reporting and even old aunty here is guilty of the new newspeak from time to time.

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Add your comment
