

# Managing and Utilizing Mass Media as a Communication Tool During a Crisis: A Case of Tham Luang Cave Rescue Operation in Mae Sai, Chiang Rai

**Bampen Maitreesophon, Ph.D**

Program Director, Stamford International University, Phetchaburi Campus, Thailand.

bampen.maitreesophon@stamford.edu

## Abstract

This research aimed to explain how media were handled and utilized at Tham Luang Cave where twelve boys and a football coach were trapped in the flooded cave complex and examined how local media in different areas created trust in the news coverage. Research results revealed that media coverage of the almost 20 days of non-stop rescue operations involving 10,000 individuals, 100s government agencies, over 100 divers, 1,000 reporters, and more than 10 nationalities of experts, presented an enormous challenge to coordinate all the spokespeople and insure that reliable information was disseminated. Three main tasks the rescue team used to handle and utilize media wisely and effectively that led to success were: 1) media management, 2) social media utilization, and 3) communication after the crisis. The successful operation created an unbelievable social movement as online people from all over the world used social media to express their interest in, pray for, and praise the victims and the rescue team, and made Tham Luang a now famous tourist attraction.

**Keywords:** Media, Communication, Crisis Communication, Tham Luang Cave

## 1. Introduction

Mass media are major communication channels used to reach to majority of people, large group of audiences, or public. They refer to a collection of various types of media include media technologies broadcasting in forms of traditionally and electronically methods. Mass media, as a kind of communicating platform, cover newspapers, magazines, radio, television, film, and the Internet. Digital media owned by mass media organizations, such as social media sites, websites, internet-bases radio and television are also a part of mass media. In today's world of information and rapid change of new technology, most major mass communication organizations use both regular or traditional and internet-based media platforms to transmit their message to the public. The media is powerful (Karen Hurt: 2016: Online), it could be able to affect organizations in either positive or negative ways. People in information era associate with other by using electronic device as a method of communication.

As we all are living in the world of rapid change of innovation and modern communication technology that social media becomes our close friend influencing on our day-to-day life. We spend many hours a day surfing on internet, which the number of hours of consuming social media is surprisingly increasing (Evan Azano, 2017: online). Crisis such as natural disaster, terrorist, a sudden downturn economy, or disease spreading, is a situation, incident, event, disaster, or disagreement happened unexpectedly and immediately that requires urgent and difficult decision making within a short time. Without handling it properly and professionally, crisis may become worse and affecting on an individual, groups, community, or the whole society (Wikipedia, 2018: online).

The terms of 'quick' and 'quickly' are commonly used when describing an effective crisis response (Coombs, 2015). Jennifer Miller (2016: Online) explained that the media calls a crisis "breaking news" and crises are like unexpected gifts from the news god. Crisis that leads to disaster, which involves a large group of people, tends to call a public attention. Yuan Wang and Chuqing Dong (2017: online), stated that crisis communication was one of the areas strongly influenced by the development of social media. Today, mass media are considered as one of the most important means of communication (Fateme Ghassabi, Firoozeh Zare-Farashbandi, 2015: Online). The mass media include newspapers, radio and television have the power to make or break a business (Zerman, 1995: Online). They have become inseparable part of any social situation (Fateme Ghassabi, Firoozeh Zare-Farashbandi, 2015: Online).

Since we are living in a media world where media becomes a part of our life, everything happens in a different part of the world can be seen and known worldwide within minute. It seems the world becomes smaller by the advancement of high technology. Evan Azano (2017: Online), summarized numbers of hours of people associating with internet. He pointed out that teenagers take longer hours of working on internet. They take up to nine hours a day while the other age groups spent almost two hours or 116 minutes a day. He also compared number of hours in a lifetime people spent on popular social media. Surprisingly, people spent 1 year and 10 months on YouTube, 1 year and 7 months on Facebook, and 8 months on Instagram. From this phenomenon, we can see that most people in the information era are familiar with new technology, advanced innovation, and especially social media as a part of our life. This is why crisis, when happens, is affecting people globally (Coombs, 2014).

Crisis occurred recently at Tham Luang Cave, Mae Sai District; Chiang Rai Province attracted public attention worldwide. The successful rescue operation had made a Cave well known as one of the most challenging and interesting tourist attractions in Northern Thailand. The tough operation of searching 12 boys and a football coach of Moo Pa or Wild Boar team whom were trapped in a flooded and complex cave for 10 days was almost impossible. Victims finding mission was hard and tough but the rescue mission after finding all of them alive was supreme harder. However, the almost impossible mission turned to be an incredible but possible operation because of the effective management strategies of the operation team led by former Chiang Rai Governor; Mr. Narongsak Osotthanakorn.

### ***Statement of the Problem***

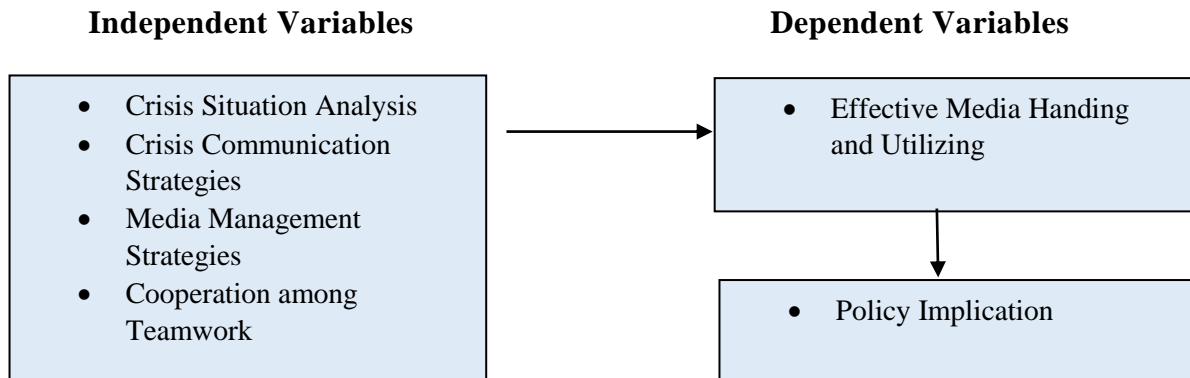
Crisis may become worse or may lead to disaster if without a proper and quick respond. Effective communication among an operation team and with the public and the stakeholders will also help sending useful information together with ongoing situations. Mass media include social media can be great tools to guide the operation team to do the right way at the right time and encourage everyone to take proper action during a crisis. This study will focus on how well mass media were handling and utilizing during a rescue operation and how reporters in newsrooms worked to make sure their news were reliable.

### ***Research Objectives***

This research aimed to: 1) explain how media were handling and utilizing at Tham Luang Cave where twelve boys and a football coach were trapped in the flooded and complex cave and 2) examine how local media in different areas checked and reported this breaking news trustworthy.

### ***Conceptual Framework***

The conceptual framework of this research was focused on four independent variables that were presumed to lead to effective media handling and utilizing.



### ***Scope of the Research***

- 1) This research is limited to study and explain how media were handling and utilizing at Tham Luang Cave where twelve boys and a football coach were trapped in the flooded cave. The media cover local and international media outlets who were at on site reporting news of the rescue operation.
- 2) Local media mentioned in this study focuses on president of radio broadcasting club, Phetchaburi Province, radio station directors and managers in Phetchaburi and Prachuab Khirikhun Provinces who followed ongoing situation and reported news of Tham Luang Cave Rescue from their stations during the rescue operation.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***Communication and communication theory***

As we know, communication is a process; it is a process of sending and receiving information. There are two types of communication: verbal and nonverbal. Effective communication encourages a response or feedback from receiver. Shannon; an American Mathematician and Weaver, a scientist, explained the model of communication since 1948. They summarized that the communication model composed of sender, encoder, channel, and decoder. In their point of view, sender is a person who creates and sends message via selected channel. Encoder or transmitter could be machine or equipment sender chooses to use to transform message into signal or the other forms before sending. Channel is the medium such as e-mail, letter, chat, etc. that sender chooses to use to communicate or send message. Decoder or receiver is a machine used to transform signal or the other code into message or person translates signal into message.

Communication theory was first mention in 1980 by S.F. Scudder who wrote on his book that "all living things being exist and communicate" but the way to communicate might be different. They may use their sound, language, breath, action, reaction, movement, color transformation, physical change, gesture, etc. to communicate with each other. Different kinds of living things may communicate in different way.

For instance, babies may communicate with their mothers by crying when they are hungry or get wet but when they are grown up, they can speak or communicate with their mothers by using understandable languages. Military may use more of nonverbal communication, body language or signal to communicate with their team than other human beings.

Farm corps communicate their needs with farmers by using colors. Brown rice seeds in paddy fields mean it is time for harvesting but the green ones mean they are too young to be harvested. However, brown leaves on rose bushes do not mean harvesting time but this incident indicates a time for gardeners to water and take good care of those plants. Also with animals, they communicate with each other or their owners by using sound, gesture, color transmission, movement, etc.

In summary, according to Shannon and Weaver, the communication model composes of sender who creates or sends message, encoder, channel, and decoder or receiver, which means machine to convert message or person who receives and translate message.

### ***Crisis Communication***

Before going to crisis communication definition, we need to clarify what is crisis. Coombs (2015) mentioned that numbers of practitioners and academic persons frequently uses this term but the meaning of the word crisis itself is very broad. It covers any unpredictable but not unexpected event. It refers to a dangerous time or unwanted incidents occurs at the organization, or at any place, that needs a quick and effective solution. Collins Dictionary explained crisis is a crucial stage or a turning point in the course of something, especially in a sequence of events or a disease. Crisis can harm organization image or reputation. Without a proper and quick response, crisis can become worse and may lead to disaster. During crisis, organization should appoint communication experts to deal with troubles and unwanted issues professionally to help protecting organization's reputation.

Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (2009) summarized three stages to manage a crisis: 1) diagnosis of crisis, 2) planning, and 3) adjusting to changes. At the first stage of diagnosis of crisis, organization leaders and managers should determine and analyze crisis-warning signals and prepare employees to face it with caution, courage, and determination. Any warning alarm sign happens at that period must be taken into consideration and requires proper action.

At the second stage or the planning stage, the crisis management team must response to the crisis right away. The team needs to communicate with employees and stakeholders to prevent chaos or to cool down the employees. The crisis management team must take proper action immediately and effectively. It is necessary to communicate with employees about ongoing situation and solution. The adjusting to changes stage helps organization to perform effectively after crisis, staffs and administrators are required to adjust themselves suit to changes or new situation. The organization will learn and analyze causes that created crisis that no mistakes should be repeated. In addition, the organization should apply new plan or strategies to prevent crisis in the future.

Crisis communication is a strategy or plan that organization uses during crisis or emergency. It covers the way organization communicates with its staffs, stakeholders, and the public. Crisis communication helps protecting organization reputation as well as maintaining good image. Actually, the goal of crisis communication is trying to reduce the damage a crisis affects an organization and its stakeholder (Coombs, 2015).

### ***Media Management***

Media covers traditional news outlets, social media or any platforms of media used to send news and entertainments to public or a large group of people. During a crisis, an effective communication and a good relation building with media is very important. Crisis communication team must pay attention to the role of the editor or the publisher in major newspapers or major channels (Albaran, 2006). Organization should never be rude in social media (Coombs, 2015) at the same time; the crisis plan should include social media editor to their team. This would help social media receive reliable news and to create positive attitude among teamwork.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study used mixed methodology. Research results were from two main sources; documentary research and qualitative research method.

#### ***Population and Samples***

This study applied a purposive random sampling approach for a qualitative method. The population of this study were 7 popular media press in Phetchaburi and Prachuab Khirikhun Provinces who reported news of Tham Luang Cave Rescue via their media sources at their newsrooms during the rescue operation mission in Chiang Rai. The population were the president of radio broadcasting club Phetchaburi, radio station directors and managers, and radio programmers.

#### ***Research Tools***

Documentary research: This part the researcher used news, articles, and other media presenting data, information, and story about the rescue operation at Tham Luang Cave in Mae Sai, Chiang Rai.

Qualitative research method: Data were gather by using in-depth interviews. Key informants were the president of radio broadcasting of Phetchaburi, the directors, managers, and programmers from 5 radio stations, who followed ongoing situations of the rescue operation at almost 24 hours a day and updated news progress or reported breaking news from their newsrooms until the rescue operation was complete. They were asked to talk about their work experience in media, how they did fact checking, which news outlet they used to verify and in their point of views, how media should be managed during a crisis.

#### ***Research Finding***

##### **1) Media Management during the Crisis**

From documentary research, it revealed that during the first few days of an operation, it involved only local media. Nevertheless, as the rescue mission seemed to be harder than expectation because of the high level of muddy water, the length and complex cave itself, and the lack of diving experts. The crisis operation team used oversea calls asking for help from international experts, this two-way communication made British diver experts flew directly to Bangkok and connected to Mae Sai to start their diving operation within a short time. Online people started posting and sharing news and concerns after international experts, Thai Navy SEAL team and other government units joined this mission. The incident became the public concerns since the majority of crisis victims were young country boys, and the mission involved more than 10 nationals of experts who joined the rescue team.

This massive operation involved 10,000 people, 100s government agencies, over 100 divers, more than 10 nationalities of experts and professionals, 900 police officers, and 2,000 soldiers (Wikipedia, 2018: online). Numbers of machines and equipment such as helicopters, ambulance, water pumping, electricity generators, and facilities were moved to support the operation. Tham Luang, at the crisis time, was not only full with wild water and the rescue team but almost 1,000 reporters were also there to work around the clock in order to be the ‘first and fast’ news agency to report this breaking news.

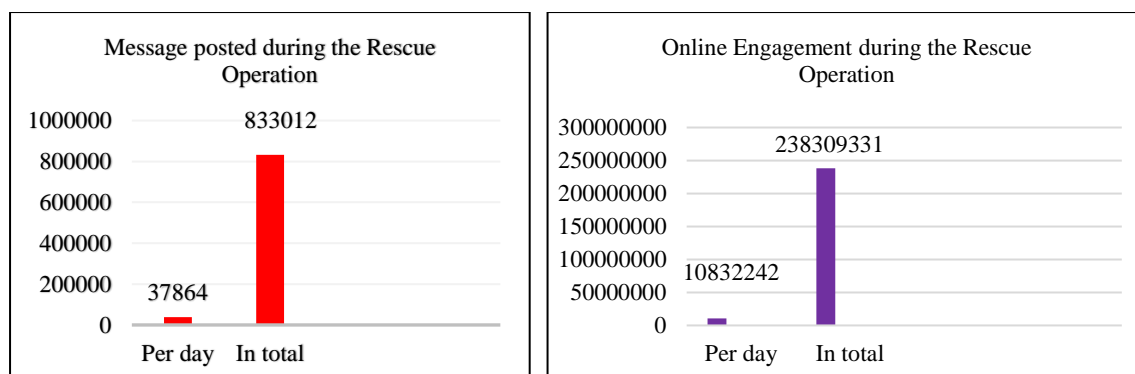
For a communication approach to support the mission, Mr. Narongsak Osotthanakorn, head of the rescue operation team, made a clear announcement to staffs and officers to do the operation eagerly and accurately. He encouraged his tirelessly working team to think all missing young boys and coach were like their own sons. Strategies applied to help support the team and to manage a vast amount of 1,000 reporters were as follows:

- 1) Set up spokesperson team that only authorized persons can deliver message to the press.
- 2) Press registration process. All reporters were required to register and wore name tag showing their name and organization at all time while entering the working zone.
- 3) Set up press zoning area for press to work. This zoning area helped the rescue team work smoothly.
- 4) Set up press dealing team to deal with reporters and to monitor news broadcasted worldwide.
- 5) Set up schedule for press release and interview session at least twice a day; in the morning before starting the mission and in the evening after the mission of each day ended.
- 6) Set up press statement team to provide accurate news and information and to make sure everyone received the right message.

## 2) Social Media Utilizing during the Crisis

The rescue operation simply grabbed public attention because the crisis victims were young boys, the operation seemed to be impossible, and it involved a large group of international experts. Thai Nave SEAL used their Facebook Page to reveal their daily mission and online people started using social media to show their concerns; especially to 13 boys and a football coach and the rescue team. It was interesting to see numbers of messages posted were at 37,864 per day and 833,012 in total. Numbers of engagements were at 10,832,242 per day and 238,309,331 in total. Table below showed numbers of messages and engagements during the operation.

Messages and Engagements Posted via Social Media during the Rescue Operation

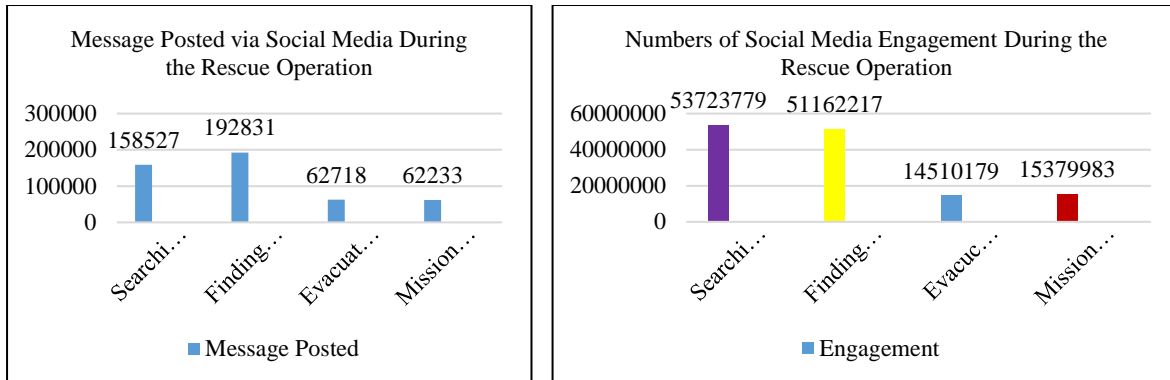


Data from <https://positioningmag.com/1179326>



To see clearly picture, table below presented a summary of social media used during each period of the rescue operation.

Message posted via social media during the rescue operation



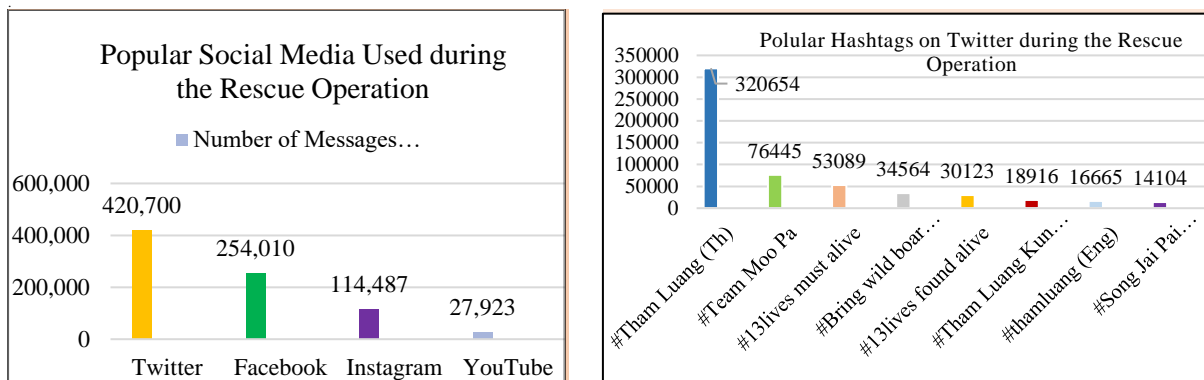
Data from <https://positioningmag.com/1179326>

During the **searching Period** (June 25-27, 2018), the first few days after international divers arrived, online people started sharing message, praying, and praising the rescue team, which 158,527 messages with 53,723,779 engagements were posted. **The finding period began on July 2**, when two British divers; John Volanthen and Richard Stanton, found the group alive on an elevate rocked about 4 kilometers from the cave mouth (Wikipedia.com, 2018: Online). Online people posted 192,831 messages and #13 lives found alive hashtag was posted with 51,162,217 engagements. **The evacuating period** was from July 8, 2018 after the first four boys were rescued from the cave. At this period, online world was celebrating on the incredible success. Numbers of 62,718 messages were posted with 14,510,179 engagements.

The last session or the mission completion period was on July 10, 2018), when all 13 missing boys and a coach were out of the cave safely and the rescue operation ended. On this day, 62,233 messages with 15,379, 983 engagements were posted. Most were thank you messages to the rescue team for their hard work and vigorous efforts together with messages of condolence for Sam; ex-Navy Seal, who lost his life in this operation.

As to look at popular social media platforms online people used and hashtags posted during an almost 20 days of a tough operation, Twitter was on the top rank, followed by Facebook and Instagram. People twitted up to 420,700 messages during the operation and the most popular hashtag online people twitted was # Tham Luang in Thai language. Table below showed popular social media used and popular hashtags searched during the rescue operation.

### Popular Social Media Used during the Rescue Operation



Data from <https://positioningmag.com/1179326>

### 3) Communication after the Crisis

The happy-ending rescue operation was complete in the evening of July 10, 2018, when the last ‘Moo Pa’ was rescued out of the cave. Later on the crisis operation Team and government agencies, such as Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Sport and Tourism, that were in charge of the mission, used both regular and online media platforms to thank all parties both domestic and international who were parts of the success operation. Vietnam breaking news on 23 July 2018 reported of the Thai government plan for organizing a thank-you event for all involved in the Tham Luang Cave rescue operation. The thank-you party, under the title “United as One”, will be held in front of Dusit Palace in Bangkok. Participants are more than 10,000 Thais who took part in the operation, representatives of foundations and the wife of ex-Navy Seal Saman Kunan, who lost his life during the mission. International rescuers, members of both Thai and foreign media and members of the Thai public who took a supporting role will also be invited.

### 4) How Local Media Make People Trust and Rely on News

From in-depth interviews with seven reporters from local media based far away from Chiang Rai Province, research results revealed that all of these reporters worked in this field between 8-20 years. Their past experience involved with reporting and broadcasting numbers of crisis or important incidents that threatened people. As human beings, their feelings were mostly like the other Thai people who wanted to hear good news, wanted to see all football team were rescued safely. But as experienced news reporters to work in newsroom and expected news from the other sources, they knew they could not rely on only one source of news outlet or fluid rumors spreading via social media unless they checked with reliable sources.

For ‘Moo Pa’ breaking news, the local press followed ongoing news at their newsrooms at almost 24 hours a day to keep them updated and to pray for ‘Moo Pa’ together with people almost around the world. Mainly they used NBT and other government news outlets as their reliable sources to summarize news reported to their listeners. All reported news with relief when the rescue mission was completed that they boys and coach were hospitalized for a special treatment. During the rescue operation, there were many sources of news broadcasted both traditional and online platforms. Some could be trusted but some could not.



Local reporters did fact checking more than three times, mostly checked with government news agencies and reliable major news outlets before reporting news. They said 'first and fast' may not work, they recommended to spend few minutes to do double or triple fact checking from trusted sources or to make sure of news before releasing.

#### **4. Summary**

Mass media are important tools for any organization when dealing with crisis. They help sending out clear message, providing useful information, and making everyone aware of ongoing situation but it is necessary to use them wisely and effectively. The almost impossible mission to rescue 13 boys and a football coach at Tham Luang involved 10,000 individuals, 100s government agencies, over 100 divers, more than 10 nationalities of experts and about 1,000 reporters. Without effective communication strategies and media management, this tough mission was hard to succeed. Social media used during the rescue operation created new phenomenon of a social movement as online people from all over the world used social media to express, pray, and praise for victims; the strangers they wanted to meet, and to the Rescue Team. In-depth interviews with local media who followed ongoing situations at almost 24 hours a day at their newsroom found that local media did more than triple fact checking on ongoing news and checked with reliable sources, mostly from NBT or other major news outlets before reporting.

#### ***Discussion***

Crisis is an incident that may shift to major disaster if it fails to handle properly. The media is powerful (Karen Hurt: 2016: Online), it could be able to affect organizations in either positive or negative ways. Too much media attention, without effective management, may create another crisis. The crisis operation team must continue their missions as their job is to manage the crisis, identify victims, reach out to them and communicate with key audiences and news media (Jennifer Miller, 2016: online). During crisis the term of 'quick' and 'quickly' were commonly used when describing an effective crisis response (Coombs, 2015). The crisis management team must take proper action immediately and effectively.

Organization needs to set up an operation team to deal with media and treat them as friends not enemies. Communication during a crisis is not for a heart-fainted person (Jane Jordan-Meier, 2016: Online). The message, presented by a well-trained spokesperson, should be clear and straightforward. The spokesperson should understand how media work and how to handle them in a proper friendly way. Organization should never be rude in social media (Coombs, 2015). Social media should be parts of crisis team. This would help social media receive reliable news and to create positive attitude among teamwork.

In summary, the successful rescue operation team of Tham Luang was based on four important parts: crisis situation analysis, crisis communication strategies, media management strategies, and effective cooperation among teamwork. The incident also created policy implication about warning signs, cave exploring safety rules and regulations for caves in Thailand. The successful operation that involved people all over the world makes Tham Luang a famous touring attraction.

**References**

- Albarran, A. B., Chan-Olmsted, S. M. & Wirth, M. O. (2006). *Handbook of media management and economics*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Armaan D. (2018), "Timeline of the Thailand cave rescue", retrieved on July 15, 2018 from <https://yp.scmp.com/news/international/article/109740/updated-timeline-thailand-cave-rescue>
- Azano. E. (2017). How much time do people spend on social media? Retrieved on February 12, 2018 from <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/marketing/how-much-time-do-people-spend-social-media-infographic>
- Chiang Rai Times (2018). "Academic's "Slam Media" Covering Rescue Operations at Tham Luang Cave". Retrieved on July 17, 2018 from <https://www.chiangraitimes.com>
- Collinsdictionary (2018). Crisis definition. Retrieved 21 July 2018 from <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/crisis>
- Coombs, W.T. (2014). State of Crisis Communication: Evidence and the Bleeding Edge, *Research Journal of the Institute for Public Relations*, 1(1).
- Coombs, W.T. (2015). *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, managing, and responding*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Esolz technologies. (2018). Role of Mass Media in Today's Society. Retrieved on 21 July 2018 from <http://esolz.net/mass-media-plays-a-crucial-role-in-influencing-peoples-mind/>
- Ghassabi. F. and Zare-Farashbandi F. (2015). The role of media in crisis management: A case study of Azarbayejan earthquake, retrieved on July 19, 2018 from <http://www.ijhsdm.org/article.asp?issn=2347-9019;year=2015>
- Griffin E, Ledbetter A., and Sparks G., (2015). *A First Look at Communication Theory*. Nine Edition, International Edition, McGraw Hill Education, Penn Plaza, NY.
- Herrero, A.G. and Pratt, C.B. (2009). An Integrated Symmetrical Model for Crisis-Communications. Retrieved on July 2, 2018 from [https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/s1532754xjpr0802\\_01](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1207/s1532754xjpr0802_01)
- Holmes. W. (2011). "Crisis communication and Social Media: Advantages, Disadvantage and Best Practice" Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative, retrieved on July 17, 2018 from <https://digital.library.txstate.edu/bitstream/>
- Hurt. K. (2018). "Handling the Media". Retrieved on July 23, 2018 from <http://www.civicus.org/view/media/Handling%20the%20Media.pdf>.
- Jordan-Meier. J. (2016). "Blood on the Floor or Name Adored? Choose Your Spokespeople Wisely". Retrieved on July 27, 2018 from [www.prnewsonline.com/wp-content/uploads/.../crisis\\_special\\_report.pdf](http://www.prnewsonline.com/wp-content/uploads/.../crisis_special_report.pdf)
- Miller. J. (2016) in PRnews Special Report: Crisis Management and the Media. Retrieved on July 22, 2018 from [www.prnewsonline.com/wp-content/uploads/](http://www.prnewsonline.com/wp-content/uploads/)
- Positioningmag.com (2018). Summary of Social Media Used. Retrieved on July 24, 2018 from <https://positioningmag.com/1179326>
- PressReader.com (2018). Commentary: Tunnel vision blights coverage of rescue, retrieved on July 10, 2018 from <http://www.pressreader.com>
- Rescue Mission Report. (2018). Report summary by the rescue team in Thai Language, available at <https://line.me/th/>
- Thai PBS. (2018). Tham Luang cave ordeal puts spotlight on Thai media", retrieved on July 23, 2018 from <http://englishnews.thaipbs.or.th/tham-luang-cave>
- Wikipedia (2018). Crisis. Retrieved on July 25, 2018 from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crisis>

- VietnamBreaking news. (23 July 2018). Thailand: Thank-you event for all involved in Tham Luang Cave rescue <https://www.vietnambreakingnews.com/2018/07/thailand-thank-you-event-for-all-involved-in-tham-luang-cave-rescue/>
- Wang Y. and Dong C. (2017). Applying Social Media in Crisis Communication: Retrieved July 21, 2018 from [www.lifescienceglobal.com/pms/index.php/](http://www.lifescienceglobal.com/pms/index.php/)
- West, R., & Turner, L. (2000). Introducing communication theory. Mountain View, C.A.: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Zerman D. (1995) "Crisis communication: managing the mass media" retrieved July 19, 2018 from <https://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/full/10.1108/09685229510793013>