

How to win friends and influence people - using the media to get results

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study is to consider the factors leading up to a crisis at the Capricorn Helicopter Rescue Service, Rockhampton. The community support for the organisation and media coverage on this issue forced a political decision from the Minister of Emergency Services to remove the requirement for a mandatory Air Operator's Certificate (AOC) by the organisation as a condition of its departmental service agreement and funding.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The responsibility for primary funding for helicopter rescue services in Queensland falls to the State Government through the Department of Emergency Services (DES). The Department financially and administratively supports the four community helicopter providers (Figure 1.1) (Queensland

Government, 2007a). Like other essential services, the shortfall in government funding (60% annually, (DES, 2006)) comes from the community, (Becker, 2007d, pers. comms., 5 June).

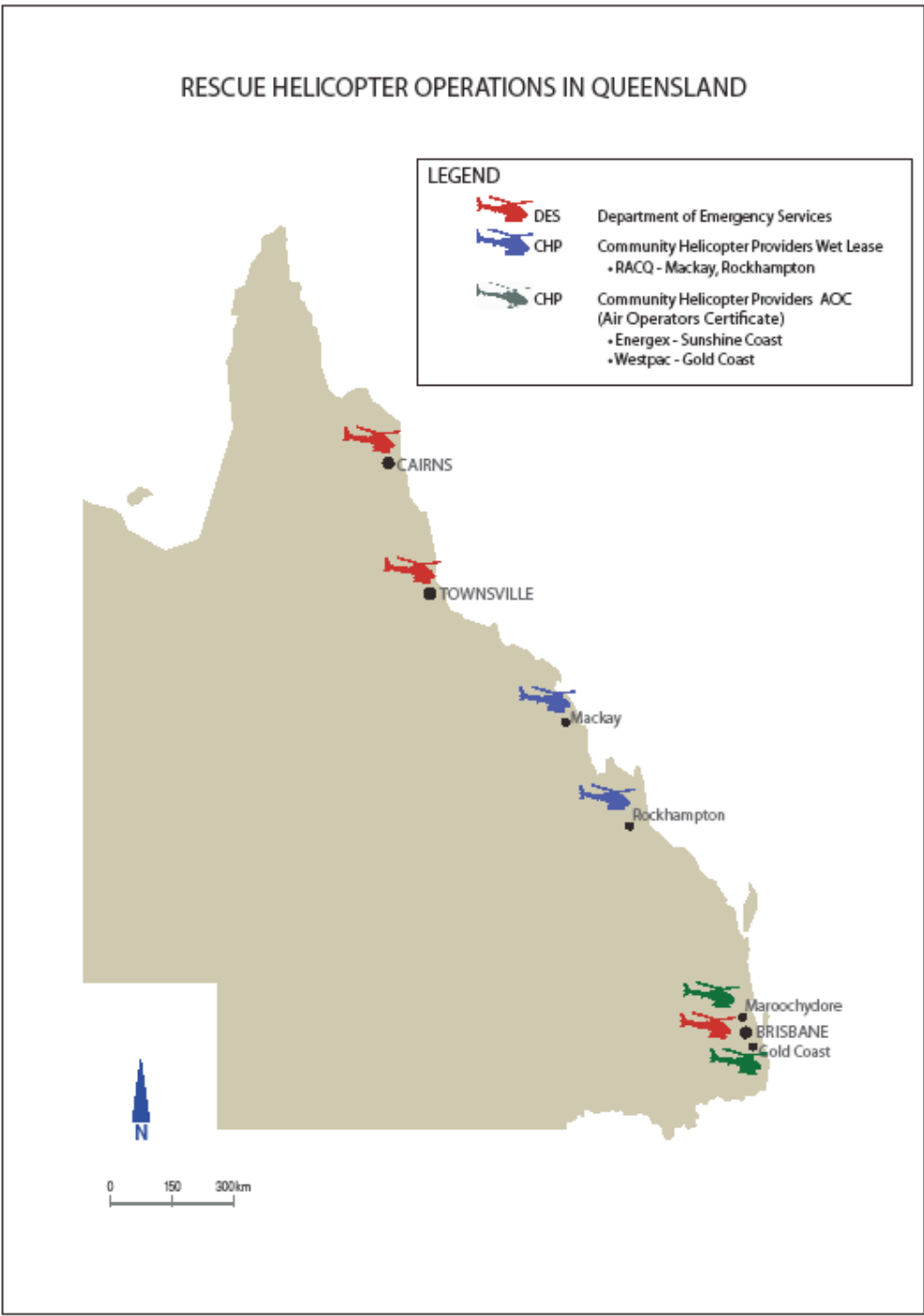


Figure 1.1: Rescue helicopter locations in Queensland 2008

The Capricorn Helicopter Rescue Service is based in Rockhampton, covering the Capricornia region with a total population of around 100,000 (Figure 1.2).

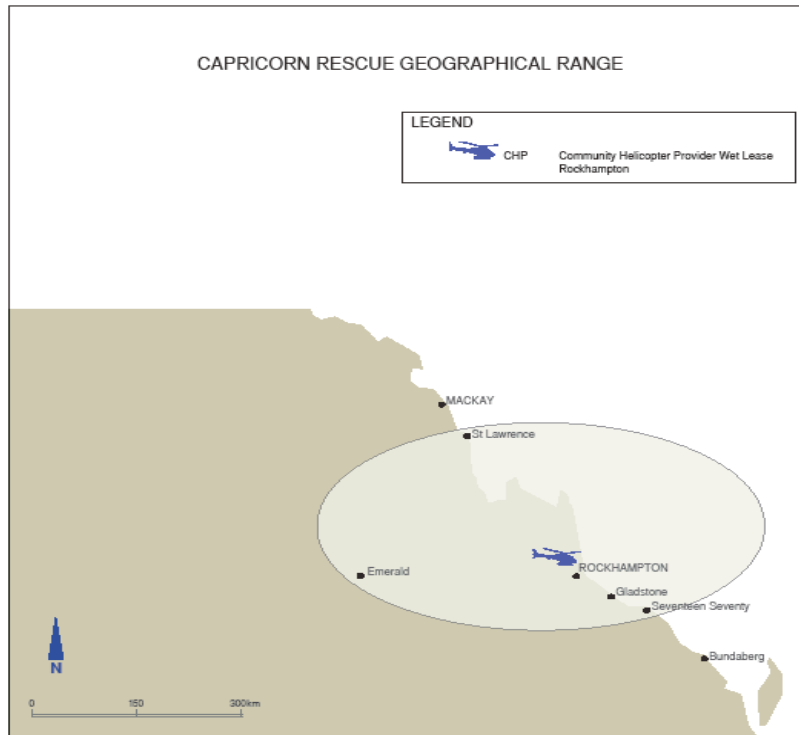


Figure 1.2: Geographical coverage of Capricorn Rescue 2008

1.1 Events that led to the issue

Periodically Capricorn Rescue must renegotiate its service agreement with the State Government. After nearly nine months of negotiating, with no new agreement ready to sign, and the previous agreement about to expire, Capricorn Rescue, after calling a Special Board meeting, circulated a press release to the media at 10am Friday, March 16, 2007. This influenced the Minister to act with an immediate rectification of the service agreement and a media announcement removing the requirement for Capricorn Rescue to hold

an AOC by 4pm that same day. This announcement ensured the seamless, continuous operation of the helicopter rescue service.

1.2 The Case Study

The need for effective public relations strategies is greatly heightened when an organisation is presented with a crisis situation (Fortunato, 2008). Capricorn Rescue had a crisis situation which could have resulted in the closure of the service, and took action.

An AOC is permission granted by the Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) to conduct commercial activities. It is required when an organisation conducts aerial work including ambulance functions (Australian Government, 2008). To continue operating seamlessly, an AOC holder must apply for, and be issued with, a new AOC prior to the expiry of the existing AOC. The dates are crucial for operation. In Rockhampton, Jayrow International is the AOC holder because it is the owner of the helicopter and directly employs the pilots for Capricorn Rescue, this is called a '*wet lease*' arrangement.

1.3 Context of the Study

This case study provides an insight into a small organisation with strong community and media support tackling the State Government on an issue critical to its survival. History does tend to repeat itself and this study seeks to identify the advantages and disadvantages of using the media for political purposes.

Negotiating the service agreement contract is often a long and bureaucratic process. This paper considers the influence the media had for the Minister to reverse his decision and change the terms of the Agreement in a single day. Thus, the objective of this case study was an evaluation of the use of the media by Capricorn Rescue and its effect in a political situation.

2.0 METHODS

A case study was deemed the most appropriate research method as it allows the researcher to trace events over time and retrospectively (Hendrix, 2001). Two types of data were used: media content analysis data (from 16 March 2007 to 22 March 2007) and focus group data (21 participants) considering salience

beliefs and corporate reputation. The two processes result in a balance that would be lost in the use of either method alone (Mansell *et al.*, 2004).

Documentation from the period 13 June 2006 to 2 May 2007 was sourced from Capricorn Rescue. The Department of Emergency Services and Minister for Emergency Services, Hon Pat Purcell MP, were not directly approached for information.

3.0 ANALYSIS

3.1 Content analysis of media

With eleven prominent articles it became a significant issue of political importance. Sixty three percent of all the news items appeared on a single day, Friday March 16, 2007. This number may seem low but the regional coverage received on the front page of the Rockhampton *Morning Bulletin* with “*Backflip rescues chopper service*” continues on page three. That day, Friday March 16, 2007 three more articles appeared in different sections, the Editor’s Opinion “*Commonsense to the rescue*”, Community Opinion “*Community outrage – before the backflip*” and on page three “*Opposition gives minister a fail on air regulation – Cloud over chopper service blows away*”.

Using Entman’s (2007) four functions of frames, it was found that 90.9% of articles were framed as moral evaluation. The specific frame *backflip* appeared in 18.52% of the coded specific frames.

The use of emotive words in the headlines of these articles eg. *Chopper backflip welcomed*, led readers to a quick judgement on the moral evaluation of the issue. The inverted pyramid of classic hard news in print is reflected in the overall moral evaluation results (Dorfman, 2003).

An analysis of content direct from media releases of Capricorn Rescue and Opposition Emergency Services Minister, Ted Malone, was undertaken. Six of the eleven news articles contained exact phrases from press releases. Within those articles 54% of journalist copy was direct quotes from the press releases.

An initial viewing of the articles presents as biased. But further analysis of the framing in each paragraph of each article reveals an interesting result. Fifty nine per cent of the articles contained fact framed paragraphs (Table 4.1). Content was coded at the level of the paragraph as fitting an opinion frame, a fact frame, a mixed opinion and fact frame.

Newspaper Article Title	Opinion		Fact		Mixed		Total	
	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
<i>Rescue chopper contract</i>	25%	1	75%	3	0%	0	100%	4
<i>Chopper jeopardised</i>	25%	2	38%	3	38%	3	100%	8
<i>Backflip rescues chopper service</i>	18%	3	59%	10	24%	4	100%	17
<i>Commonsense to the rescue</i>	50%	6	33%	4	17%	2	100%	12
<i>Cloud over chopper service blows away</i>	20%	3	60%	9	20%	3	100%	15
<i>Community outrage - before the backflip</i>	100%	5	0%	0	0%	0	100%	5
<i>Chopper backflip</i>	25%	1	25%	1	50%	2	100%	4
<i>Rescue chopper relief in central Qld</i>	33%	2	67%	4	0%	0	100%	6
<i>Chopper backflip welcomed</i>	50%	10	25%	5	25%	5	100%	20
<i>State owes regions copter services \$4M</i>	43%	6	50%	7	7%	1	100%	14
<i>sms to editor re CQ rescue</i>	100%	1	0%	0	0%	0	100%	1
Total	38%	40	43%	46	19%	20	100%	106

Note: Each cell shows percentage of paragraphs within each article containing each type of frame, followed by the raw number in parentheses.

Table 3.1: Distribution of frames by paragraph per article

3.2 Focus Group Analysis

The focus groups support that the Rockhampton community relies heavily on local press and its family and friends to provide information on local issues. The most succinct understanding of corporate reputation came from Male, 63, 'so it is like goodwill.' Participants rated the organisation. Five rated it as excellent, twelve said it was good and the rest were not prepared to rank, as they did not know enough about the operations and financials of Capricorn Rescue.

The CEO, Kay Becker is '*synonymous*' with the organisation as five participants said. This astute remark from Male, 33, '*the CEO has good credibility you see her in the paper and on the TV a lot, but that doesn't mean she is doing a good job, she makes mistakes like the rest of us but the perception is high as people do listen to her.*' This statement particularly recognises the influence of the media on corporate reputation.

3.3 Analysis of the Case Study

The community support for Capricorn Rescue is very strong, well known and considered an essential part of the community medical support services available, as was reported in the focus groups. It was commonly believed that the State Government would never close or remove the service from the regional area, as that would be '*political suicide*' (Male, 55).

The accident history of Capricorn Rescue was an example of a hurdle for the organisation, and was seen to widen the business legitimacy gap for the business (Allen, 2007). Allen (2007) states the wider the gap the greater the propensity for external intervention, for example loss of licence to operate or increased regulation.

The CEO personifies the organisation to its key stakeholders, both externally and internally (Grunig, 1993). A significant factor for corporate management are social and political pressures known as the social environment model in the corporate political environment and organisational response (Allen, 2007). An additional thread to corporate reputation identified by the focus groups was the CEO's role in reputation formation, '*She is a great speaker on behalf of them and she is very passionate about the service*' (Female, 63). This is further supported by focus group studies on corporate reputation by Gardberg (2006).

The CEO, Kay Becker, has managed to build a mutually beneficial relationship with the key stakeholders and the media (Becker, 2007d pers. comms., 21 June). Frequent interaction with reporters increases familiarity with the organisation and enhances the probability that the company will be featured in the media, thus reducing the threat of exposure (Fombrun and Gardberg, 2000). The importance of an authentic local community spokesperson cannot be

underestimated in terms of effectiveness and credibility (Holder and Treno, 1997). She has taken advantage of the organisation's relationship with the media when necessary.

The leadership provided by the CEO is a huge factor in the success of the organisation within the community. Despite the personal lobbying by the CEO direct to the policymakers, an immediate decision was not forthcoming. Another approach was deemed necessary to meet the organisation's own agendas and critical timeframes.

A decision was indeed ready to be made (Chase, 1984), after nine months of Departmental negotiations and with six weeks until the current service agreement and contractual lease with Jayrow Helicopters Pty Ltd about to expire. The organisation at first sought to find alignment with the Department through two way dialogue, rather than moving to a confrontationist orientation (Allen, 2007).

As the organisation released vital information to the media, Capricorn Rescue set the agenda, in line with their corporate agenda, and successfully attempted to guide the issue through the policy process. The Board recognised that an issue does not become an issue unless it is visible to the policy makers and the public via the media (Dorfman, 2003).

4.0 DISCUSSION

Analysis of a case study after the fact provides us with the benefit of hindsight (Grunig and Grunig, 1998). Through establishing the background, and events leading to the case it was possible to identify factors and influences including but not limited to the amount and presence of media coverage, and the community response to the issue. It was then a process of identifying strengths and weaknesses, suggesting appropriate theories and making recommendations for the organisation and further research (Wade and Schramm, 1969).

Active publics recognise an issue as a problem, believe it involves them personally, and believe they are unconstrained enough to do something about it

(Grunig, 1990). A very large part of the psyche seems to be 'them' and 'us', that is, regional Queenslanders verses the citysiders in Brisbane (Becker, 2007d, pers. comms., 5 June). This was confirmed in the focus groups with participants saying *'we have all the coal here, and all the money goes to the south east corner, and we make all the money,'* Female, 59.

The community's rapid response to the possibility of Capricorn Rescue being shutdown shows loyalty and regional bonding. The focus groups' participants had their own set opinion about the organisation. This is in line with situational theory where people only expose themselves to messages that support their own attitudes.

Although the CEO has no formal media advocacy training, she strategically uses the media to support the organisation. Through the media content analysis it was possible to identify the strength Capricorn Rescue has with the media, evidenced with the high use of direct quotes from their press releases. This means the organisation needs to be aware of this and write accordingly.

The Capricorn Rescue Board had a difficult decision to make, one that threatened the very existence of the service. But with early identification of the issue, evaluating the impacts and determining their options, it was able to successfully manage the issue (Allen, 2007). The Board played out their tactical control over the timing of this decision. Making the decision that their organisation simply could not operate under the service agreement on offer, could have been considered by some to be self destruction. In this case the power of the media to influence change cannot be overlooked.

This case study is an example of episodic framing of the issue of potential closure of the rescue service and the government's backflip. The emotive words, particularly those used in the headlines of the media articles analysis represent examples of framing an issue.

The most important sequence of events is as follows:-at the Board Meeting (16 March 2007) it was decided that the organisation would not hold its own AOC as required by the proposed service agreement from the Department. The next day (15 March 2007) the CEO rang the Department and confirmed verbally that

without an AOC the organisation may fold when the previous service agreement expired (30 April 2007). A press release was sent at 1000 hours that morning. One of the board members, Adrian de Groot, rang and spoke directly to the Minister Pat Purcell, to inform him of the Boards' decision. By 1600 hours the Minister issued a media release announcing the amendment to the service agreement that Capricorn Rescue did not need to hold its own AOC that Jayrow could continue to be the holder of the AOC, and the service would continue to operate.

The critical press releases from Capricorn Rescue were sent to meet publication deadlines, thus allowing the organisation to rally public support and the issue to gather momentum, with the Minister responding within one day of an announcement of the potential winding up of the rescue service. The community was comforted by the issue being dealt with so promptly by the government. The media were responsible for applying pressure to the Ministers office, speeding up the decision process.

As in systems theory, the relationship between the media and the local community is evident from the focus groups and media content analysis. The State Government by being slow to respond to the finalisation of the service agreement meant that Capricorn Rescue, responded in a specific way. But when dealing with the media and community, it responded differently. The local community and media actively believed they could do something to fix the problem. They did this by applying pressure to the Minister.

The decision by the Minister to directly respond to the media pressure was evidence of the bridge between the formal political system and Australian society (Marsh, 2007). The influence of public opinion on democracy and being influenced by the voice of the people is crucial to survival in Australian politics. The Minister's fast, substantial reaction to the issue was a positive result for Capricorn Rescue. It was also an unusual situation for a politician to have the capacity to make a sweeping decision on very short notice (Walgrave, 2006). The fact that the Department had been working on this documentation for such

a long time, meant the background work was done and, it appears the decision was forced out of the Department by the Minister.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

Agenda setting theory applies to this case study, as the media played an important role in shaping the public opinion which, in turn, changed the public policy for the rescue service. This was evident through the content media analysis, which mentions *the power of the media*. The public relations activities of the organisation were evident in the replicated copy almost verbatim that appeared in the press. Thus the organisation through its media activities was playing a manipulative agenda setting role. Through strategic representation the direct result was the ability to impact upon key decision making.

This case study highlights the importance of Capricorn Rescue within the community, as seen through the support by the community and the media when told they may lose the service altogether if the Department could not work out an agreeable service agreement between the two parties.

Certainly the Rockhampton community's respect for the Capricorn Rescue, the CEO's strong relationship and open policy with the media, and the popularity of the organisation within the community were all driving factors in the decision making process either consciously or subconsciously by the Board to publicly release information to the media. Media coverage in this case study stimulated a change in policy by the Minister.

In this case after months of cooperation and collaboration with the Department, confrontation and controversy were the keys to obtaining an immediate time critical result.

The purpose of this case study was to contribute to a growing body of knowledge surrounding the questions of how the media influences politics and how to effectively communicate and influence the media before action is taken against an organisation.

The case study provides an example of the importance of corporate reputation when a crisis arises, and how to harness the support of the community, through the media, to influence a political decision.

Areas for more research identified in this dissertation include: the power of the media to influence a decision; framing of messages in respect to regional cultural influences; focusing on the issue of social salience measured at the local community and state on specific issues; and how the news media have influenced public perceptions.

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