

THE EVOLUTION OF CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS IN SABAH: FROM TRADITIONAL MEDIA TO SOCIAL MEDIA DOMINANCE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PRN17

EVOLUSI KOMUNIKASI KRISIS DI SABAH: DARI MEDIA TRADISIONAL KE DOMINASI MEDIA SOSIAL DAN IMPLIKASINYA TERHADAP PRN17

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ABSTRACT

Crisis communication in Sabah's electoral politics has evolved substantially with the convergence of traditional media, digital platforms and interpersonal communication networks. PRN17, the 2025 Sabah state election, presents a significant case for understanding how crises manifest in a political environment shaped by real-time information flows, viral user-generated content and heightened public emotion. This study examines crisis communication across the pre-election, election-day and post-election phases of PRN17, analysing interactions among political actors, the Election Commission (EC), mainstream media, influencers and ordinary citizens. Using the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), and the Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) framework alongside localised insights into Sabah's media ecology, this study identifies a marked shift toward a hybrid crisis communication model. Findings show that traditional media continue to function as verification anchors, yet social media now dominate crisis emergence and public interpretation. Citizen documentation and influencer engagement accelerated misinformation risks while simultaneously enabling rapid narrative correction. Sabah's cultural context that particularly interpersonal trust networks and long-standing sentiment regarding state autonomy has further shaped crisis dynamics. These elements intensified in the aftermath of

PRN17 when GRS's openness to working with a Peninsular-based party, despite earlier commitments to maintain a local-based coalition, triggered widespread digital debate and perceptions of expectancy violation across platforms. This extended the crisis beyond election night into the coalition formation period. The study concludes that crisis communication in Sabah has matured into a hybrid system requiring agile, emotionally attuned and multi-channel strategies grounded in local socio-political realities. Future electoral crises will demand sustained engagement across traditional media, digital environments and interpersonal networks to maintain trust, stability and democratic legitimacy.

Keywords: Crisis communication, PRN17, Sabah elections, social media, hybrid media model.

ABSTRAK

Komunikasi krisis dalam konteks politik pilihan raya di Sabah telah mengalami perubahan ketara sejajar dengan perkembangan media digital, penumpuan media dan peningkatan penyertaan awam dalam penghasilan serta penyebaran maklumat. Pilihan Raya Negeri Sabah ke-17 (PRN17) pada tahun 2025 menyediakan satu konteks penting untuk meneliti bagaimana krisis politik terbentuk, ditafsir dan dipanjangkan dalam persekitaran komunikasi yang dicirikan oleh aliran maklumat masa nyata, kandungan tular dan emosi awam yang tinggi. Kajian ini menganalisis komunikasi krisis merentasi fasa pra-pilihan raya, hari pengundian dan pasca-pilihan raya dengan memberi tumpuan kepada interaksi antara aktor politik, Suruhanjaya Pilihan Raya (SPR), media arus perdana, mempengaruhi digital dan masyarakat awam. Berpandukan model Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC), Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) dan kerangka Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM), kajian ini mengenal pasti peralihan ke arah sistem komunikasi krisis hibrid yang menggabungkan media tradisional, media sosial dan rangkaian komunikasi interpersonal. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa media tradisional masih berfungsi sebagai sumber pengesahan utama, namun media sosial memainkan peranan dominan dalam mencetuskan krisis dan membentuk tafsiran awam. Dokumentasi oleh rakyat serta penglibatan mempengaruhi mempercepatkan penyebaran maklumat tidak sah, namun pada masa yang sama membolehkan pembetulan naratif dilakukan dengan lebih pantas. Konteks sosio-budaya Sabah, khususnya kebergantungan kepada kepercayaan interpersonal dan sentimen berkaitan autonomi negeri, turut mempengaruhi dinamik krisis ini. Keadaan menjadi lebih ketara dalam

tempoh pasca-PRN17 apabila keterbukaan Gabungan Rakyat Sabah (GRS) untuk bekerjasama dengan parti berasaskan Semenanjung mencetuskan persepsi pelanggaran jangkakan dalam kalangan pengundi. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa komunikasi krisis politik di Sabah telah berkembang menjadi satu sistem hibrid yang memerlukan strategi komunikasi yang tangkas, peka terhadap emosi dan berasaskan realiti tempatan bagi mengekalkan kepercayaan awam dan legitimasi demokrasi.

Kata Kunci: Komunikasi krisis, PRN17, pilihan raya Sabah, media sosial, media tradisional, model media hibrid.

Introduction

Crisis communication within political environments has transformed dramatically in tandem with the rise of participatory media, media convergence and the expansion of digitally networked publics. In Sabah, this transformation is especially significant due to its unique political culture, historical grievances related to autonomy and a media environment shaped by diverse ethnic, linguistic and geographical contexts. The electorate now navigates information produced simultaneously across traditional journalism, social media and interpersonal community networks, creating a complex and dynamic environment for political crisis formation and response.

The PRN17 election took place during a period marked by heightened political uncertainty, contestation of identity-based rhetoric and rising expectations for transparency among digital-native voters. The digital landscape in Sabah presents a unique dichotomy: while urban centres like Kota Kinabalu enjoy high-speed connectivity, rural constituencies rely heavily on a blended consumption of digital content via limited bandwidth and traditional interpersonal verification (MCMC, 2024). This creates a 'two-step flow' of crisis communication where misinformation seeded online is often harvested and spread offline in rural communities.

Sabah's longstanding "Sabah for Sabahans" sentiment resurfaced throughout the election cycle, with political parties positioning themselves as advocates for regional autonomy and local interests. However, following the election, public sentiment intensified when GRS signalled openness to including a Peninsular-based party in its coalition despite earlier commitments to maintain a Sabah-centric alliance. This development triggered widespread

critical discourse on Facebook, TikTok and X, with many users framing the move as a breach of trust and a direct contradiction to campaign narratives.

These post-election reactions demonstrate how crisis communication now extends far beyond official announcements and traditional media coverage. Public emotions, viral commentary and user-generated interpretations shape the trajectory of political crises in real time. Elections no longer culminate at the ballot box; rather, they evolve into prolonged periods of digital crisis negotiation shaped by coalition-building outcomes, legitimacy narratives and public expectations of political authenticity.

Understanding PRN17's crisis dynamics therefore requires an analytical framework that integrates global crisis communication theories with Sabah's localised media culture. This study examines how traditional media, social media and interpersonal networks interacted during PRN17 and how these layers produced a hybridised communication environment that influenced public perception throughout the election cycle.

Despite the growing body of literature on political crisis communication and digital media, several gaps remain. Existing studies largely focus on national-level elections, government-led crises, or crisis communication in highly centralised media systems, with limited attention to subnational electoral contexts characterised by strong local identities and uneven media infrastructures. In the Malaysian context, research has predominantly examined Peninsular-based political dynamics, often overlooking Sabah's distinct socio-political history, autonomy-oriented sentiments, and hybrid communication ecology that integrates social media, traditional journalism and interpersonal trust networks. Moreover, while crisis communication theories such as the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), and Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) framework have been widely applied independently, fewer studies examine their combined relevance in explaining prolonged, emotionally driven political crises. This study addresses these gaps by analysing crisis communication dynamics during PRN17 in Sabah, offering a localised, theory-integrated examination of how crises emerge, escalate and persist within a hybrid media environment shaped by digital participation and community-based validation.

Literature Review

Research on crisis communication has expanded significantly over the past two decades as scholars recognised the complexity of crises occurring in digitally networked environments. Traditional approaches centred on institutional control, message design and stakeholder management, whereas contemporary models emphasise participatory information flows, emotional dynamics and the decentralisation of crisis narratives.

Early crisis communication scholarship positioned institutions as the primary agents of information dissemination. Coombs' (2020) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) emphasises the reputational consequences of crisis responses and categorises organisational strategies into denial, diminishment, rebuilding and bolstering. SCCT has been widely applied in political communication to analyse how government agencies, political parties and election management bodies respond to legitimacy threats, procedural errors or public criticism.

The rise of digital platforms disrupted this institutional-centred paradigm. The Social-Mediated Crisis Communication (SMCC) model (Austin, Liu, & Jin, 2012) argues that publics now play active roles in creating, distributing and interpreting crisis information. Influencers, ordinary citizens and grassroots digital communities participate in shaping crisis narratives, reducing institutional control and accelerating the pace of crisis escalation. Studies by Schultz, Utz and Göritz (2011) demonstrated that public responses differ across platforms, with social media amplifying emotional reactions due to its networked, interactive structure.

The emotional dimension of crises is further developed in the Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) model by Jin, Pang, and Cameron (2012), which highlights anger, anxiety and uncertainty as driving forces behind crisis interpretation and escalation. Emotional intelligence therefore becomes central to effective crisis communication, especially in politically sensitive environments.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in comparative case analysis, textual interpretation and media triangulation. Given the non-linear and rapidly evolving nature of political crises, qualitative methods provide the flexibility needed to capture narrative shifts, emotional dynamics and cross-platform interactions.

Data were collected from three primary sources: traditional media reports, social media content and scholarly literature. Traditional media articles were sourced from Daily Express Sabah, Malaysiakini, The Star, Malay Mail and Free Malaysia Today, yielding seventy-two verified articles published between November 2024 and January 2025. These reports provided factual accounts of election procedures, official statements and crisis events.

Data analysis was conducted using a three-stage thematic coding process that combined deductive and inductive approaches. In the first stage, preliminary codes were developed based on established crisis communication frameworks, including misinformation, institutional response, emotional escalation, legitimacy concerns and identity-based narratives. In the second stage, inductive coding was applied to capture emergent themes specific to the PRN17 context, such as autonomy-related sentiment, interpersonal verification practices and expectancy violation discourse. Coding was conducted iteratively, with repeated reviews of the dataset to refine category boundaries and ensure internal consistency. To enhance analytical reliability, coded data were cross-checked through multiple rounds of comparison between themes and source material, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in observable patterns across media platforms. This iterative process strengthened the credibility and transparency of the qualitative analysis.

Social media content was gathered from Facebook, TikTok, X and public WhatsApp groups using targeted keyword searches related to PRN17, misinformation incidents and EC announcements. A total of 213 publicly available posts, videos and discussions were archived between December 2024 and February 2025. Anonymity was preserved and no private communication channels were accessed.

Data analysis followed a three-stage thematic coding process. First, crisis events were categorised into misinformation, identity rhetoric, procedural concerns, emotional escalation and legitimacy disputes. Second, these categories were analysed based on actor involvement, including political parties, the EC, mainstream media, influencers and citizens. Finally, communication flows were mapped to illustrate interactions between traditional media, social media and interpersonal networks.

Crisis Communication Across the PRN17 Election Cycle

a) Pre-Election Crisis Dynamics

The pre-election period was characterised by resurging identity-based narratives, misinformation spikes and contested interpretations of electoral processes. Viral claims regarding undocumented migrant registration and manipulated polling-date announcements circulated widely through WhatsApp, Facebook and TikTok, prompting rapid clarifications from the EC. Despite these efforts, misinformation persisted within rural communities where interpersonal communication remained a stronger source of credibility than digital fact-checks. This dual ecosystem reflects Sabah's hybrid media environment where digital and interpersonal channels influence crisis narratives simultaneously.

b) Election-Day Crisis Dynamics

Election Day marked the peak of crisis intensity as high voter turnout coincided with widespread citizen documentation through social media. Viral videos alleging ballot paper shortages and procedural irregularities triggered immediate public concern. The EC responded promptly through Facebook and X, while *The Star* and *Daily Express Sabah* provided contextual explanations that stabilised public sentiment. Influencers and youth activists played active roles in debunking misinformation, confirming the SMCC model's assertion that digital intermediaries significantly shape crisis flows. Political parties deployed on-ground verification teams, merging digital monitoring with interpersonal validation to address unfolding narratives.

c) Post-Election Crisis Dynamics

Post-election crises shifted from procedural issues to legitimacy narratives and coalition negotiations. Viral posts questioning close-seat results circulated on

Facebook and WhatsApp, prompting traditional media to release clarifications on recount protocols and EC procedures.

The emotional landscape intensified when GRS indicated a willingness to collaborate with a Peninsular party, a move that digital publics perceived as a divergence from earlier campaign narratives supporting local-based coalitions. Digital platforms became sites of open discourse, with many users interpreting the decision through the lens of identity politics and autonomy aspirations. The crisis extended beyond election night into an emotionally charged period of coalition-making, illustrating the prolonged nature of political crises in the digital age. The summary of these dynamics is presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Crisis Communication Phases, Media Flows and Outcomes during PRN17

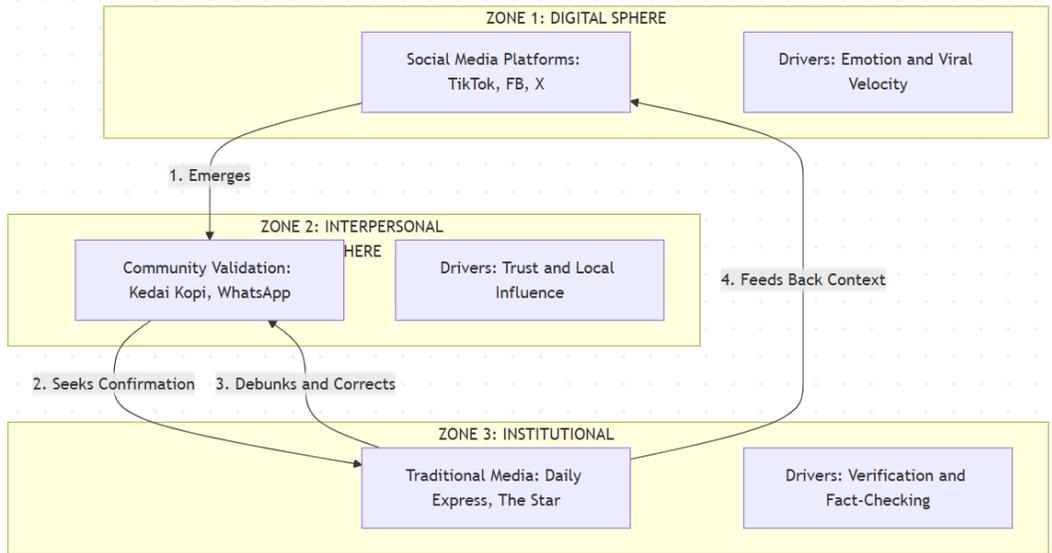
Crisis Phase	Key Triggers / Events	Media Sphere Involved	Information Flow & Public Response	Outcome Tendency
Pre-Election	Identity rhetoric, migrant rumours, ethnic sentiments	Social Media (TikTok, FB) → Interpersonal (WhatsApp, Kedai kopi) → Traditional Media	Rumours originate online → circulated emotionally → communities seek clarification through trusted interpersonal networks → traditional media attempts to verify.	Mixed stabilisation if verification is accepted by community leaders.
Election Day	Viral videos, procedural complaints, ballot-handling allegations	Social media ↔ Traditional Media	Real-time documentation creates outrage → traditional media fact-checks → social media reshapes narrative.	Short-term tension , generally stabilises if corrections are trusted.
Post-Election	Coalition formation, "betrayal" discourse, expectancy violation	Social media → Interpersonal (strong emotional amplification)	Emotional narratives overpower verification → trust in traditional media weakens → interpersonal networks validate anger.	High risk of prolonged crisis due to emotional intensity and identity factors.

Discussion

The crisis communication dynamics observed during PRN17 demonstrate a maturing hybrid model shaped by interactions between traditional media, digital platforms and interpersonal trust networks (see Figure 1). Traditional media retained their role as authoritative verification sources, offering clarity during misinformation spikes. However, social media now govern the pace, emotional tone and public interpretation of crises. From an SMCC perspective, these dynamics demonstrate how non-institutional actors such as citizens and influencers actively shape crisis narratives, often preceding official clarification.

From the perspective of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the Election Commission's rapid clarification strategies functioned as reputational maintenance efforts aimed at reducing perceived responsibility and restoring procedural legitimacy. The persistence of post-election discontent can be interpreted through the Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) framework, particularly in terms of sustained anger and anxiety that continued to shape public interpretation despite factual clarification. The findings are interpreted through three complementary frameworks: SMCC explains actor-driven information flows, SCCT accounts for institutional response strategies and ICM clarifies the emotional persistence of post-election crises.

Figure 1 The Hybrid Crisis Communication Ecosystem in Sabah Politics (Modelled on PRN17).



Source: Authors' construct (2025)

Interpretation of Figure 1: Figure 1 illustrates the cyclical nature of crisis communication observed during PRN17, identified here as a "Hybrid Ecosystem." The process typically begins in Zone 1 (Digital Sphere), where triggers such as viral videos or identity-based rumours emerge with high velocity and emotional intensity. Unlike traditional models where the media leads, here the narrative flows first to Zone 2 (Interpersonal Sphere). In this zone, rural and semi-urban communities act as a "trust filter," validating the digital rumours through local networks like WhatsApp groups and Kedai Kopi discussions.

The cycle only reaches Zone 3 (Institutional Anchor), comprising the traditional media and the Election Commission, after the narrative has already gained traction. The diagram shows two return paths: the institutional anchor attempts to "Debunk and Correct" the narrative back to the community (Zone 2) and "Feed Back Context" to the digital sphere (Zone 1). However, the loop suggests that without rapid intervention in Zone 1, the emotional momentum in Zones 1 and 2 can overpower the factual corrections from Zone 3, leading to the prolonged crises described in this study.

Sabah's sociocultural context strongly influences crisis interpretation. Rural communities rely on interpersonal communication and local leadership for validation, while urban and youth populations interpret crises primarily through digital discourse. This creates a multilayered crisis environment where traditional, digital and interpersonal channels intersect to shape public perception.

The post-election discourse regarding coalition formation provides a case study in Expectancy Violation Theory. When political actors pivot from 'state-centric' narratives to 'federal-collaboration' pragmatism, it creates cognitive dissonance among voters. In the case of PRN17, this was observed not necessarily as a rejection of policy, but as a dissonance between the marketed identity of the coalition and its governance strategy. This suggests that in Sabah's political psyche, 'autonomy' is not just a policy preference but an emotional trust anchor. Overall, PRN17 reflects a political communication environment where effective crisis management requires agility, emotional intelligence and simultaneous engagement across multiple media layers.

Recommendations

The study recommends institutionalising digital crisis monitoring units, strengthening media–institution collaboration, enhancing rural digital literacy and incorporating emotional intelligence into crisis messaging, while engaging community leaders as trusted intermediaries. Standardised EC crisis protocols are essential for addressing recurring misinformation patterns.

Limitations Study

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the analysis relies on publicly available media content and does not include in-depth interviews with political actors, journalists or community leaders, which could provide richer insight into decision-making processes and interpersonal communication dynamics. Second, while social media content offers valuable real-time data, it may overrepresent highly engaged or vocal users, potentially underrepresenting less digitally active populations. Finally, the study focuses on a single electoral event within Sabah, limiting broader generalisation. Future research may address these limitations through mixed-method approaches, longitudinal studies or comparative analyses with elections in Peninsular Malaysia and other subnational contexts.

Conclusion

PRN17 illustrates a significant transformation in Sabah's crisis communication landscape. Media convergence and participatory digital culture have redefined how political crises are formed, interpreted and resolved. Misinformation, emotional narratives and real-time public commentary now shape crisis trajectories more rapidly and forcefully than in past elections. The controversy surrounding GRS's willingness to include a Peninsular party post-election underscores the extent to which political decisions can generate prolonged digital crises rooted in identity, trust and autonomy sentiments.

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