**AN INVESTIGATION MEDIA/COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY – HOW MUCH OF A SHARED PROCESS WITH THE MEDIA**

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**Abstract**

The media/communications strategy used by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau in support of its investigation into the uncontained engine failure that occurred over Batam Island, Indonesia on 4 November 2010, and involved a Qantas A380 showed the benefits of sharing information with the media in the interest of transport safety.

Such information sharing is not without its risks, and investigation agencies need to be aware, and take account of the possible impact on national and international stakeholder relationships. However, the considered release to the media of investigation information establishes the investigation agency as a credible, reliable and technically adept information source. Repeat media visits to an agency web site provides an opportunity to influence media coverage, rather than being constrained to reacting to media requests for information, and to reactively dispelling any incorrect reporting of an accident. Proactive media management allows us to better control the public message.

Finally, the early reporting of any identified significant or critical organisational or systemic issues that might adversely affect the future of aviation safety, and explanation of relevant safety action to address those issues, ensures public confidence in the ability of the aviation system to prevent an accident’s recurrence.

**Introduction**

Transport safety investigators are very good at gathering and protecting information. Those protections are based on the International Standards and Recommended Practices in Annex 13 to the Convention on Civil Aviation, *Aircraft Accident and Incident Investigation* (Annex 13). State legislation, such as the Australian *Transport Safety Investigation Act 2003* (the Act), adapts the information management principles of Annex 13 and applies them in the national context.

Similarly, Annex 13 and national legislation stipulate the circumstances in which safety information might be shared. In Australia, the ATSB is required under the Act to cooperate with other state, territory and Commonwealth agencies and national authorities of other countries that have functions or powers relating to transport safety. Memoranda of Understanding are used to further standardise the collection, collation and sharing of safety information between bodies and agencies. Depending on other States’ legislation and protocols, the ATSB can share information with our international colleagues where it is able to do so.

Investigation agencies can be reserved, and some might say defensive in their interactions with the media, which we all understand has a primary role of informing the public. Understandably, investigation agencies must carefully consider the timing of any release of information, and the dilemma of addressing the media’s generally immediate requirements for information with the investigator’s justifiable focus on certainty and strong evidence, can be demanding. So what are the opportunities and threats when information is shared with our majority shareholder, the travelling public, via the media? What is the most reliable means of disseminating information to the public in the interests of transport safety, and how much is enough? What are the implications for accredited representatives and their advisers of sharing such information?

This paper discusses a number of the benefits and risks of a proactive media strategy in the dissemination of information to the public in the interests of transport safety. Using the ATSB’s media/communications strategy that was applied to the investigation into the recent Qantas A380 uncontained engine failure over Batam Island, Indonesia as a case study, the paper proposes that investigation agencies should consider being more proactive and therefore in control of their interactions with the media. As shown in the case of the ATSB A380 investigation, a proactive media strategy has the potential to decrease the workload associated with that interaction, to lessen the media demands on affected parties, to ensure that the facts are in the public arena, and to appropriately reassure the travelling public as to the safety of ongoing operations.

A proactive media strategy is not without its risks. ATSB investigations that involve high capacity passenger carrying aircraft invariably involve international participants and their advisers. Given that these participants and their advisors are likely to be dispersed around the globe and located in different time zones and States, stakeholder engagement in the development and release of investigation information via the media can be challenging. The ever increasing use of electronic media, in particular social media such as ‘twitter’, can also erode the available time for that pre-release engagement.

**Context**

Aviation is the darling of the transport industry in Australia. Australia is a large country, travel involves great distances and the population is spread unevenly. Once away from the major coastal population centres, infrastructure can be remote. Air travel has been and remains pivotal in Australia’s development and the country has, over the last century, had its share of aviation pioneers.

Aviation in Australia is relatively safe, and there has not been an Australian-registered high capacity passenger transport hull loss since 1968.(1) There has been an average of 17 fatal accidents per year involving fully-registered aircraft in Australia over the last 10 years, and an average of 30 fatalities per year in that time. At the same time, in 2010 1,368 people died on Australian roads and around 22 people were hospitalised for every person killed, amounting to about 30,000 people affected that year.(2)

Of interest, there is generally a degree of short-term media interest in road and other accidents in Australia, but intense media interest is likely following most aviation accidents and serious incidents. A single fatality agricultural accident can attract national media interest. Most accidents result in media requests for news grabs, conferences, images and recorded and other interviews.

In terms of the media’s hunger for information, Australia is probably no more demanding than in other countries. Grabs and answers are demanded now. ‘Facts’ are queried when they are unconfirmed. Blame is sought and the extent of ‘pilot error’ questioned. Aircraft anomalies that are quickly resolved and accepted by industry as being part of normal operations can be presented in the media as evidence that a national carrier’s operation is unsafe, or not as safe as it used to be.

Likewise, industry commentators and other vested interests can appear, introducing diverse political, commercial or industrial commentary.

In that context, an arguably previously introverted ATSB engaged the media in its communications management of the investigation into the Qantas A380 accident over Batam Island. The requirements of the ATSB’s governing legislation and media/communications policy and procedures were applied and interpreted in new ways as the A380 story unfolded.

**National legislation**

In terms of States’ judicial authorities, Annex 13 clause 5.12 *Non-disclosure of records* lists those records that must not be made available without due process for purposes other than accident or incident investigation. Similarly, Annex 13 limits the inclusion of such records in a final report. Specifically, records that are not relevant to the analysis of the occurrence shall not be disclosed.

Australia has lodged extensive differences with clause 5.12 of Annex 13 and is a strong advocate for change that will be debated in a multi-disciplinary task force to be established by the International Civil Aviation Organization. Australia’s most significant concern is that clause 5.12 only allows for a judicial authority to make the decision to release safety information for purposes other than an accident investigation, which may not be the most appropriate authority to perform this function in every circumstance. Nonetheless, Australia upholds the key principle in clause 5.12 that accident records should be protected to ensure the continued free-flow of safety information for future accident investigations.

The Australian *Transport Safety Investigation Act 2003* (the Act) is based on the principles of Annex 13. The Act includes powers of compulsion in respect of the collection of evidence, and persons so compelled cannot refuse to answer or to provide evidence on the grounds of self-incrimination. Concurrently, there are very strong protections on information gathered by the ATSB and pragmatic release provisions. Worth noting in the context of this paper is that the release of information is possible when:

* performing functions under or in connection with the Act
* disclosure is necessary or desirable in the interests of transport safety (although there are limits on disclosing personal information coercively acquired or obtained through interviews).

On a day-to-day basis however, ATSB interactions with the media will be in accordance with the requirements of its Safety Investigation Quality System (which supports the Act); in particular, the Policy and Procedures Manual. The following discussion highlights those procedures that have historically been applied by ATSB investigators and communications staff. That includes the use of digital technology to disseminate traditional communications products and in response to media-initiated requests for information. As will be seen, in a number of instances, the A380 media strategy required on-the-go consideration of revised procedures.

**ATSB media-related policy and procedures**

Among its key performance indicators, the ATSB seeks to maintain and improve transport safety and public confidence through excellence in safety communication and education.

The Australian public views the media as a credible source of information and the media has great power in influencing opinions, attitudes and behaviour. The ATSB believes that the media has a role to play in informing the travelling public, and shaping the ATSB’s corporate image of how it is perceived by the community.

ATSB principles for dealing with the media fall into three broad categories:

* While respecting the ATSB’s independence, the Minister’s office needs to be aware of all major issues that require political or policy input, and that impact on public confidence.
* The ATSB Communication team responds to the media in respect of factual information. Frequently, a media request for information will be passed to the relevant area for advice or assistance.
* In business hours, media inquiries are referred to the Communication team unless received by an authorised person. Out of hours, certain rostered officers are authorised to respond to media requests.

During the on-site phase of an investigation, it is normal practice for the investigator in charge to conduct an on-site media briefing. Off-site media conferences are generally conducted by the Chief Commissioner or by the relevant modal general manager. The Communication team alerts the media of conferences and other media opportunities and coordinates the supporting logistical arrangements.

Historically, a media conference or interview can be called on an issue or investigation at the discretion of the Chief Commissioner or by an authorised officer. Authorised staff have conducted many TV and radio interviews, which can be live to air or pre-recorded.

A media release is required when the ATSB wants:

* to target a message with key safety lessons to industry and the general public
* a concise and factually accurate outline of what has happened
* a balanced commentary of the impact of the event on the industry, the public and transport safety
* a succinct yet clear statement on what has been done, what is currently being done and what is intended to be done in the future
* a clear statement on how and where to gain more specific information, and where and when any media conference will be held.

Experience has shown that the above approach reduces misunderstandings and misrepresentations and can assist achieving accurate and balanced reporting.

**Creation of the ATSB as an independent Commonwealth Government statutory Agency on 1 July 2009**

On 1 July 2009, the ATSB was created as an independent Commonwealth Government statutory Agency and one full-time Chief Commissioner and two part-time Commissioners assumed responsibility for the ATSB at that time. Concurrently, a communications section was established in the new ATSB structure. This section was independent of communications resources in the Minister’s Office and department. All the Commissioners have been, and continue to be very keen to engage with the media to ensure the communication of safety messages to industry and to the general public, and to increase the ATSB’s profile.

As stated in the *Transport Safety Investigation Act 2003* (TSI Act) and the Minister’s Statement of Expectations, the ATSB is required to communicate any factors that contribute to transport safety, including information on accidents and other safety occurrences to the transport industry and the general public. Between May and July 2010, the ATSB conducted a comprehensive market research survey with key industry and community stakeholders. The purpose of the research was to gain stakeholders' views and insights about the way the ATSB communicates important transport safety messages across the rail, marine and aviation modes.

As with the other transport modes surveyed, the research found that the aviation industry was segmented, and that differing communications strategies were relevant to differing parts of the industry. Those segments included (Figure 1):

* **ATSB disciples.** The ATSB disciples were more likely to have a role in safety standards and less likely to have a role as a pilot or crew. They had positive perceptions of, dealt frequently with, and believed that they had a strong relationship with the ATSB. The group had a heavier reliance than other segments on the ATSB and placed great importance on a wide variety of forms of communication. The group read investigation reports to greater depth than just the report abstracts and summaries, and frequently visited the ATSB web site and had a positive perception of that site.
* **Trusting.** Trusting individuals were more likely to be based internationally and to not be actively involved in dealing with or addressing issues related to safety. They were less likely to be a head, chair or Chief Executive Officer (CEO) or to have a role in safety standards and relied on investigation report abstracts and summaries, and also less likely to use the ATSB website.
* **Disaffected.** The disaffected were more likely to be heads, chairs or CEOs that actively dealt with or addressed issues relating to safety. They were less likely to be based internationally. Although this group believed that all of the then forms of communication were important, investigation reports were reported to be most effective. Face-to-face and other contact with the ATSB and coverage in the general media was less effective for this group.
* **Disconnected.** Disconnected stakeholders were more likely to have a role as a pilot or crew and to be actively involved in dealing with or addressing issues related to safety. This group showed a general indifference to the information supplied by the ATSB as compared to the other segments. That was attributed to the decreased personal relevance of the ATSB to the scope of their job.

**Figure 1: Aviation industry segmentation**

Those findings showed that, even among the aviation industry, no single communications strategy was applicable across the industry. Equally importantly, they provided a knowledge base from which to develop an effective, evidence‑based communication strategy that better targeted each of the ATSB’s aviation industry audience groups. A second market research study is planned for completion in September 2011.

During May and June 2011, the ATSB participated in an omnibus survey that involved about 2,400 people from the general public across Australia. The purpose of the survey was to gauge the level of awareness of the ATSB and the general public’s understanding of what the ATSB does.

The results showed that about 35% of people were aware of the ATSB. Interestingly, those who were aware of, and had a better understanding of the ATSB’s role tended to be male and over 35 years of age. The results also showed that about 80% of respondents relied on media such as TV, the internet and newspapers to keep informed.

The results of the omnibus survey confirmed that the mass media is the most effective and far‑reaching means to interact with the public. The ATSB has also commenced examining various social media for integration into its media strategy.

The media is seen by the ATSB as a potentially strong ally in the pursuit of safety enhancement. Equally, it can work against ATSB intentions. One negative story can have a lingering effect on people’s impressions compared with one positive story, which can be overlooked or quickly forgotten. A negative story or an issue handled badly can undo years of hard work in relationship building.

This does not mean that investigation agencies, or their staff should be afraid of or avoid the media. On the contrary, a well‑planned communications strategy that includes coordinated media contact can help build confidence between investigation agencies and the media, building agency credibility as a result. It is also vital that there is an understanding of the nature of the media — it is a 24-hours a day, 7-days a week industry.

It was in that context that the ATSB interacted with the media, industry stakeholders and the travelling public in support of the investigation into the Qantas A380 uncontained engine failure that occurred over Batam Island, Indonesia on 4 November 2010. The following discussion will examine the foundations of the ATSB communications strategy during the initial stages of that investigation, and the tools employed to support that communication. The communication timeline in the case of the A380 investigation is outlined and the benefits to the ATSB and other stakeholders of the communication, and associated risks are discussed.

**ATSB communications approach in respect of its Qantas A380 investigation**

The fourth of November 2010 commenced like any other day at the ATSB, being routine aside from the Chief Commissioner being in Adelaide on other ATSB business. Routine media interaction was taking place in accordance with normal policy and procedure. This included:

* The routine release to the public of any transport safety investigation reports in accordance with ATSB policy and procedure.
* Web site updates of investigation(s) progress on an as required basis. Those updates were generally of a minor nature and, if sensitive or of elevated risk, would be cleared for release by the Chief Commissioner.
* Routine media and other stakeholder enquiries would be handled by the communications section.
* Requests for lower sensitivity and risk media interviews and conferences being managed by the relevant modal general manager.

There was no expectation or planning for the possibility of a high profile media event affecting the ATSB that day.

At about 1315 Eastern Daylight-saving Time (Coordinated Universal Time + 11 hours) that day, the ATSB began receiving initial indications and then media enquiries about a possible accident involving a Qantas aircraft. That translated to initial advice to the General Manager Aviation Investigations from the Notifications and Confidential Reporting manager that ‘there are reports of a crash in Indonesia involving a Qantas aircraft.’ It is not difficult to imagine the initial, temporary disbelief of aviation management, and a telephone call to the airline’s safety department was unable to clarify the situation any further at that time.

Shortly after, a number of investigators began scurrying around the office advising of various web‑ and social media-based stories, pictures, etc indicating that a number of items that were apparently from a Qantas aircraft had impacted the ground and been recovered on Batam Island. In addition, an aircraft was shown in the air with what appeared to be some form of liquid trailing behind. As the normal ATSB response to the possible on-site deployment of an ATSB investigation team was put in motion, additional information was sought from Qantas and other agencies and the Chief Commissioner and Minister’s Office were advised.

Details remained sketchy as initial and rapidly increasing media interest affected the ATSB, whereas the agreement of which State would undertake the investigation was yet to be resolved. In addition, any ATSB media response had to take account of the media approach taken by other stakeholders. In that regard, whereas Qantas interacted with the media to a large extent, the engine manufacturer was much less involved and the ATSB was unaware of any specific media interaction by any other of the parties to the investigation.

Initial discussions with the Chief Commissioner confirmed the previously established ATSB media/communications goals of: communicating key safety messages to industry and the general public; increasing the ATSB’s public profile; establishing the ATSB ‘brand’ in the various transport modes and public domain; enhancing the ATSB’s credibility as a reliable source of technical and transport safety information; and increasing media confidence in the ATSB as that source of information. The aim was that as media confidence in the ATSB grew, the media would seek out the ATSB, rather than the ATSB having to react to already-released media stories from other sources. Given the circumstances in this case, it was resolved that the following initial media/communications strategy was appropriate:

* The ATSB web site was to be used to ‘push’ information as it became available and as facts could be established, including to dispel misreporting.
* In the Chief Commissioner’s absence, the General Manager Aviation Safety Investigation would be the sole spokesperson for the ATSB. That was to ensure consistency of the information provided to the media, and to build media confidence and trust in any ATSB information released.
* In the early stages, any information released to the media was to be primarily process oriented, concentrating on the nature of the ATSB response and involvement in the investigation. The ATSB also sought to highlight the international nature of the investigation, and the involvement of international collegiate safety agencies and their advisers in accordance with international protocols. That approach indicated the expertise available to the investigation, reinforcing the media’s and other stakeholder’s confidence and trust in the ATSB, and therefore reliance on the factual nature and technical veracity of any information provided.
* Media updates were to be released regularly via the ATSB web site and other means whenever new and important information came to hand. That included the ATSB response to the accident and information that was in the interests of transport safety. Importance was placed on informing the travelling public of the continued safe operation of the aviation industry, and on dispelling any incorrect notions of the accident.

A timeline of the initial media/communications response is at Appendix A.

The initial web update was released to the media at 4:30 pm on 4 November 2011. The update confirmed that the ATSB was investigating the accident and gave the known details of the flight and accident at that time. The involvement of international agencies and an indicative investigation schedule were highlighted. The benefits of subscribing to the ATSB web site, in terms of receiving alerts of investigation updates was introduced in an effort to have media outlets and other stakeholders re‑visit the web site. It was felt that would encourage the perception that the ATSB was the most credible and reliable information source.

Subsequent web updates at 5:55 pm on 4 November and 11:30 am on 5 November reinforced the support of international colleagues and that the ATSB was leading the investigation.

On 5 November 2011, and as additional information became available and media interest built in response to a number of external sources of information, it was quickly decided that a media conference was appropriate. That conference took place in the afternoon of 5 November and was followed shortly after by a number of television interviews involving the General Manager Aviation Safety Investigation.

In addition to indicating the known circumstances of the accident, the conference and interviews continued to concentrate on the investigation process and extensive support from a number of international colleagues. The return of the flight data and cockpit recorders to Australia and their download was reported, confirming early progress in the investigation and ATSB capabilities and control of the investigation in that area.

The indicative investigation schedule was re-stated, although care was taken to indicate that, should any significant or critical organisational or systemic issues be identified in the interim that might adversely affect the future of aviation safety, then the ATSB would immediately bring those issues to the attention of the relevant authorities. The aim here was to indicate the thoroughness of the investigation and to confirm the ATSB’s responsibility for timely safety enhancement, and for preventing a recurrence of the accident.

A key early step was establishing contact with interested parties and other safety agencies. The importance of consultation, coordination and sharing of media-related information was agreed and protocols established.

It was obvious to all from the earliest photographs, passenger accounts and other commentary that the aircraft’s No 2 engine was somehow a factor in the accident. In addition, there was intense media interest in Batam Island, Indonesia and in the involvement of and risk to the inhabitants of that island. The recovery from the island and its transfer to Singapore and then to the United Kingdom (UK) under ATSB custody of part of what at that stage appeared to be an engine turbine disk prompted another web update at 9:15 am on Sunday 7 November 2010. The disposition of the investigation team in Singapore and in the UK, and tasking of those groups to assist the ATSB investigation was highlighted in that update.

The movement of the recovered portion of disk to the UK in the custody of ATSB investigators, and its examination under their supervision reinforced that the ATSB was in control of the investigation, and that its investigators could be relied on to work professionally with the engine manufacturer’s and other experts to determine the facts of the failure. Similarly, the outline given of the tasking of the various groups in support of the ATSB investigation reinforced the standing of the ATSB as the lead investigator.

A point to note here is that agencies should expect media requests for copies of video footage and any photographs that are included in media releases or placed on their web sites. Legislation needs to be considered in any decision to release this material to the web, etc. In the case of the 7 November and subsequent web updates, a number of requests were received for higher resolution ATSB photographs and copies of other documentation. While such release may not be restricted, the quality of any digital photographs could prove problematic for media outlets and, any investment to address the media’s requirements absorbs the investigation’s time and precious resources.

In the first 3 to 4 weeks of this investigation, one third of the ATSB’s aviation investigators were involved. Combining that number of investigators with the number of corporate and other support staff involved over that time, an average of a quarter of the total ATSB staff was involved in the investigation over that period.

The Chief Commissioner returned from Adelaide to the ATSB’s central office in Canberra on Monday 8 November and a review was undertaken of the initial media strategy. That review determined that web updates should ideally take place at least twice per day during the on‑site phase of the investigation and, on an ongoing basis, whenever new and significant information came to hand. A minimum of one web update was also necessary when significant or critical organisational or systemic issues were identified that might adversely affect the future of aviation safety. It was decided that, given that the consistent face of the ATSB to that time had been the General Manager Aviation Safety Investigation, and the apparent benefits of that consistency of presentation, the general manager would continue in that role until the release of the Preliminary Factual Report on 3 December 2011. The Chief Commissioner would take over as ‘the face’ of the ATSB at that time.

Investigators worked closely with the Communications section and legal staff to balance public interest in the information that was being released to the web and via other means in terms of its possible use in future court proceedings, and to ensure its restricted nature in accordance with the Act. The considered release of that information was discussed and approved on the basis that the information was of a factual nature only, and that its release was desirable in the interests of transport safety (see the earlier discussion in respect of the Act). It was felt that this approach was particularly important in order to reassure the travelling public as to the safety of the aviation system, and to dispose of some of the more ill-informed speculation and rumour that had appeared in the public domain at that time. That was achieved without ever directly engaging in debate.

The routine web updates continued until 11 November 2010, when proactive safety action by the European Aviation Safety Agency was reported that reduced the risk of a recurrence of the accident. The update in that case provided a preliminary overview of the nature of the engine failure, and of the relevant airworthiness process. This further established the ATSB as a reliable source of technical information and explanation/understanding for the media and community, and indicated the span of the ATSB investigation.

It was found that, as the media appeared to increasingly access the ATSB web site for information on the investigation’s progress, requests for media comment, interviews and technical explanations diminished. That enabled the release of a number of management, investigator and other ATSB support personnel to return to their other investigation and other tasks, which had effectively been on hold since 4 November 2011.

The increased intricacy of the engine examinations in the UK and of the aircraft and its systems in Singapore moved the web site and other updates to what could probably be described as a second stage. Whereas the initial effort had predominantly been to describe the investigation process and progress, this second stage increasingly described a number of the technical aspects of the investigation. Concurrently, ATSB investigators began hearing very positive feedback from a number of industry contacts about the ATSB’s web updates. An international pilot’s forum showed additional encouraging feedback (see [www.pprune.org/rumours-news/432704-qantas-a380-uncontained-2-engine-failure-39.html](http://www.pprune.org/rumours-news/432704-qantas-a380-uncontained-2-engine-failure-39.html)).

Later, one of the pilots involved in the accident advised that, after initially sustained media efforts to interview and re-interview him, the media interest had died down. The pilot indicated that in his opinion, that coincided with the increasing number, regularity and content of the reports being posted on the ATSB web site. The pilot appreciated the opportunity that gave to adjust to the after effects of the accident.

In contrast to that positive feedback from certain stakeholders, a risk associated with the ATSB’s media approach surfaced at about that time. That risk related to long-established relationships between overseas investigation agencies and their locally-based manufacturers. Largely related to the time difference between those countries and Australia, the initial protocols were amended in consultation with safety agencies, operators and manufacturers governing the sharing and advanced notice of public announcements. The ATSB agreed that it would, in the interests of transport safety, continue its web and other media updates and that it would forward drafts of any update to the involved parties at least 12 hours before each update’s projected release. That ensured time for those parties to consider the implications of the updates to their business, and to provide feedback to the ATSB on the content of any update prior to its release the next day. Parties were also able to plan their own complementary communications activities.

A willingness to engage the media and release specific information in the interests of transport safety also allowed the ATSB to balance other media reporting, including a media release that was based on the results of a manufacturer’s investigation. In that instance, the ATSB cautioned that it did not as yet have sufficient information to itself draw that conclusion, and indicated where the ATSB and manufacturer’s investigations appeared to have concluded similarly. That reinforced that the ATSB investigation was truly independent, and that the ATSB was leading the transport safety investigation.

As the involvement of ATSB investigators in the overseas aspects of the investigation drew down, the number of web-based and other media updates diminished. However, the opportunity was taken to alert readers of the ongoing areas of investigation, and of the pending release of the Preliminary Factual Report on 3 December 2010.

Separately, aviation safety recommendation AO-2010-089-SR-012 was issued to, and responded to by Rolls‑Royce Plc on 2 December (see [www.atsb.gov.au/publications/recommendations/2010/ao-2010-089-sr-012.aspx](http://www.atsb.gov.au/publications/recommendations/2010/ao-2010-089-sr-012.aspx)). The action by Rolls-Royce Plc was instrumental in the relevant regulatory/airworthiness authorities approving Trent 900-powered A380s to return to the air. That result confirmed the efficacy of the Annex 13 approach to aviation safety investigations.

On 3 December 2010, the ATSB released its Preliminary Factual Report to the public (see <http://www.atsb.gov.au/publications/investigation_reports/2010/aair/ao-2010-089.aspx>). Consistent with ATSB policy and procedures in the case of the release of high profile and/or sensitivity investigation reports, that release was supported by a media alert and conference. In accordance with the media strategy that was revised after the Chief Commissioner’s return from Adelaide on 8 November 2010, the Chief Commissioner led that conference. A copy of that media alert, and audio of that conference is available at <http://www.atsb.gov.au/newsroom/2010/201028.aspx>).

From that time, whereas the investigative work has continued, the communications activity in support of the investigation reverted to the normal ATSB media/communications policy and procedure. Commensurately, the incidence of web site updates and other media activity in respect of the A380 investigation reduced to more like other ATSB investigations. However, on 18 May 2011, an Interim Factual Report was released to the public via the ATSB web site. This release was supported by a media alert but there was no media conference (see <http://www.atsb.gov.au/newsroom/news-items/qantas-airbus-a380-singapore.aspx>).

The ATSB will continue to monitor media opportunities and technologies for application to its media/communication strategies in support of its aviation, marine and rail investigations. Should any significant or critical organisational or systemic issues that might adversely affect the future of transport safety be identified in any of its investigations, the ATSB will avail itself of any media opportunities and technologies in order to inform stakeholders and the travelling public. It will do so in a considered manner, in the interests of transport safety.

**Conclusion**

The ATSB media/communications management in support of its investigation into the uncontained engine failure that occurred over Batam Island, Indonesia on 4 November 2010 reaffirmed the need for investigation agencies to have an established media/communications goal in the case of such accidents, and in general. Associated strategies should reflect those goals, and build/expand on existing media/communications policy and procedure, while being flexible and adaptive in their application to take account of changed circumstances as an investigation progresses.

It was found that, providing national transport safety legislation allows, the considered release of investigation information via the media is appropriate in the interests of transport safety, including appropriately reassuring the travelling public of the safety of the aviation system. Such release builds media confidence in, and reliance on the investigation agency as a credible, reliable and technically adept source of information. Repeat media visits to agency web site and other sources of information provides an opportunity to influence the media agenda to some extent, rather than being constrained to reacting to media requests for information, and to reactively dispelling any incorrect notions of an accident.

It was also found that despite the initial investment in the strategy, over time and as the media and other stakeholders recognised the flow of information that was available on the ATSB web site, the media/communications workload actually reduced and control of the information flow appeared to pass to the ATSB. Soon after, the investigator and other resources allocated to managing that flow diminished, and were able to return to their other tasks. Flight crew reported that as the information flow from the ATSB increased, the demand on their time from the media reduced.

This is not to say that a proactive media/communications strategy is without risk, or that investigation agencies should not consider their own circumstances before adopting such a strategy. Reaching out to the media can be resource intensive and specific media requirements and requests can, at times be frustrating and perhaps difficult to reconcile. There are also other stakeholder relationships and media/communications goals and strategies to be considered and managed.

However, as shown in the case of the ATSB’s media/communications management of the uncontained engine failure that occurred over Batam Island, Indonesia on 4 November 2010, a well‑planned communications strategy that includes coordinated media contact can help build confidence between investigation agencies and the media, building agency credibility as a result. The early reporting by investigation agencies of any identified significant or critical organisational or systemic issues that might adversely affect the future of aviation safety, and explanation of relevant safety action to address those issues, will ensure public confidence in the ability of the aviation system to prevent a recurrence of an accident.

The ATSB media/communications approach to the accident over Batam Island, Indonesia on 4 November 2010 has set the precedent for its future media strategies and has heightened media and public expectations of timely and factual communication flows. Fortunately for the ATSB, the policy decisions to pursue this path had already been taken and ongoing resourcing issues considered. The episode has demonstrated the value of this approach within the ATSB and has reinforced the shared responsibility for communication activities across the organisation.

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1. See the ATSB investigation report into the collision with terrain that occurred near Port headland, Western Australia on 31 December 1968 and involved Viscount 720C aircraft, registered VH-RMQ (available for download at <http://www.atsb.gov.au/publications/investigation_reports/1968/aair/aair196800001.aspx>).
2. Based on (Australian) Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics statistics.

 APPENDIX A TO

 ATSB PAPER - ISASI 2011

**INITIAL ATSB MEDIA/COMMUNICATIONS TIMELINE**

