

# **Air India Flight AI171: A Crisis Communication Case in an Evolving Responsibility Context - Applying Situational Crisis Communication Principles to an Aviation Disaster**

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**Abstract.** The case examines the crisis communication strategy adopted by Air India following the tragic crash of Flight AI171 in June 2025. It chronologically demonstrates the evolving communication strategy in the face of intense scrutiny from fact-based disclosures to empathetic messaging, welfare initiatives, and trust-building exercises. Anchored in the core analytical framework of Situational Communication Crisis Theory (SCCT), the case allows students to analyze how responsibility attribution, crisis type, and reputational threat influence the appropriateness of communication strategies. It allows for critical reflection on whether measures promoting welfare and empathetic messaging alone can suffice for long-term reputation management and what other support initiatives would be necessary to enhance stakeholder trust in the post-crisis phase.

**Keywords:** crisis communication, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), reputation management, stakeholder trust, empathy in communication, Air India.

## **1. The Tragedy**

It was 12 June 2025, Air India Flight AI171, a Boeing 787-8 operating from Ahmedabad to London Gatwick lost altitude minutes after take-off and crashed into a residential hostel complex of a medical college near the airport perimeter. This resulted in 241 fatalities among passengers and crew, along with the additional 29 casualties on the ground. Eyewitnesses shared the horror of watching dense smoke emerging from the aircraft immediately after the fall. Initial flight tracking data revealed a sharp decline in ascent rate shortly after take-off. At the time of Air India's first public announcement (14:28 IST), the exact cause of the disaster remained unidentified. Authorities cautioned the general public and media against premature conclusions regarding the cause of the tragedy.

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In the meantime, statements from aviation authorities confirmed that the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB) has commenced an official investigation and verified that recovery operations were in progress. However, in the days that followed, neither mechanical failure nor pilot error was confirmed, leading to speculations (BBC, 12 June 2025). Authorities reiterated that the report would take time as the investigation would depend on forensic analysis of flight data and maintenance records. Throughout the process, the airline publicly committed to full cooperation with investigators<sup>1</sup>.

The complicated interplay between technological uncertainty, regulatory oversight, media assessment, and stakeholder grief created a complex communication environment—one in which message timing, tone, and the amount of information disclosure carried significant reputational implications. Air India was put to a real-time stress test of crisis communication, reputation management, and accountability to stakeholders.

Following the crash, the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB), along with technical experts and aviation regulators, initiated a formal investigation into the cause of the accident. Standard investigative procedures included recovery and analysis of flight data and cockpit voice recorders, examination of aircraft maintenance records, and review of crew actions and air traffic communications. In the weeks following the crash, no official findings attributed responsibility to pilot error, mechanical failure, maintenance lapses, or any single operational factor. Given the active nature of the investigation, Air India's public communication remained subject to regulatory and legal constraints, limiting the extent to which the airline could comment on causation while responding to stakeholder demands for information.

## **2. Scrutiny and Online Backlash**

Information regarding the plane crash spread like wildfire. The first official statement from Air India confirming the incident was released after 75 minutes. There was no additional information added to the statement. By evening, almost all national and international media channels were broadcasting direct coverage of the news from Ahmedabad airport and the crash site. Debates by aviation analysts on television and other social media platforms focused on the possibility of potential mechanical failure scenarios. Hashtags related to Flight AI171 began trending across all social media platforms. Media viewers and journalists repeatedly sought clarification from Air India on three issues: 1. Possible technical causes, 2. Maintenance history of the aircraft, and 3. Whether similar aircraft would continue operating.

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1. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/ahmedabad-air-india-plane-crash-probe-findings-report-aviation-ministry-july-8-2025/article69786832.ece>