

INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES TO HEALTH CRISES - A REVIEW OF GLOBAL PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated in practice the need for direct collaboration between governing and scientific institutions. Information exchange proved to be the only tool to control the situation before a vaccine is developed and to determine the dynamics of public trust in institutions. Communication, in these terms, is an instrument for legitimizing imposed measures in society and a decisive factor for their political success.

In the context of a health crisis, the role of politicians as communicators should not be underestimated because of the influence they have over the media and public life on the one hand, and because of the existing intersections between public health goals and political interest, on the other. Political response to pandemic situations in different countries is based on established cultural traditions and political priorities, often focusing on social values that unite the majority within the society. Political orientation could influence factors such as perceived risk and behaviour.

Although politicization of anti-epidemic measures in 2020 determined subsequent attitudes toward prevention in different countries, positive outcomes have been seen when political leaders engaged with the people and called for unity. Empathy and personal example, as well as the use of social media,

have been reported as good practices. While initially the induction of fear stimulated compliance, in the long term it has been viewed as harmful and as a source of distrust.

Key words: pandemic communication, emergency, information exchange, political engagement

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated in practice the need for direct collaboration between governing and scientific institutions. It also highlighted the barriers to achieving effective synergy between them [1, 2]. Despite the scientific evidence for the possibility of sustained transmission of the new coronavirus and control of incidence through anti-epidemic measures [3], the imposition of such measures was delayed for political reasons and has been costly to society [4]. Given the lack of knowledge in the first weeks of the public health emergency, consensus within the scientific community was difficult to achieve [5] which increased the perceived instability in management approaches to meet the challenge. The pandemic presented the challenge to decision-makers to make decisions "blindly" as there was a lack of hard data on the characteristics of the threat facing the world [6, 7].

The aim of this paper is to review the existing scientific literature for examples of communication practices during health crises occurring within the past 20 years and to compare scientific perceptions on their degree of success.

Potential of communication practices

According to Boin and his colleagues, policymakers faced four aspects of the COVID crisis: understanding the crisis (1), addressing emerging issues (2), communicating risk (3), and developing exit strategies (4) [6]. All of these aspects required prior exchange with technical experts and formal statement of an adopted position and actions to the public. Communicating consistent, coherent and transparent messages is one of the basic principles of communication, and different institutions should coordinate their campaigns [8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13]. Given the unknowns and uncertainties that characterized the pandemic period, adherence to this standard for success proved difficult [14].

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Analysts acknowledge the delicate role of communication as a tool for legitimizing imposed measures in society and as a decisive factor for their political success [6, 15, 16]. Information exchange is the only tool to control the situation before a vaccine is developed [17] and determines the dynamics of public trust in institutions [9]. The design and implementation of communication is based on the management of the acquired knowledge and the reactions of the organizations or individuals involved [18]. Effective information exchange requires structural transformation and recognition of the need for communication by the institutions themselves [19]. Communication units need to have trained staff who understand the principles of social marketing and use social networks not only as a tool for disseminating messages but also as means of tracking social climate (social listening practices) [19]. Conducting pilot tests on the effectiveness and perception of the messages of the information campaign is a must [20].

Inclusion of policymakers: confirming the state of emergency and ensuring funding

According to WHO's expert position, risk communication should be led simultaneously and coordinated by all government sectors with support from partners from external organisations at local and international levels [21]. In the context of a health crisis, the role of politicians as communicators should not be underestimated because of the influence they have over the media and public life on the one hand, and because of the existing intersections between public health goals and political interest, on the other [22, 23, 24].

According to observations from the recent crises, the political response to pandemic situations in different countries is based on established cultural traditions and political priorities, often focusing on social values that unite the majority within the society [7]. Studies have shown that political orientation could influence factors such as perceived risk and behaviour. The authors also note that the politicization of anti-epidemic measures determined subsequent attitudes toward prevention among liberals and conservatives in the United States [25]. These observations follow logically from the finding that the behaviour of US

politicians from the Republican and the Democratic camps during the pandemic built on the antagonism of political formations found on other issues [26, 27]. It is notable that while persistent attitudes were a leading motive for vaccine hesitancy among Republicans, Democrats were more likely to fall victim to misinformation and, as a consequence, refuse vaccines [28]. Similar to the situation in the United States, Brazil and Mexico also showed a negative correlation between the territorial distribution of the electorate of the two presidents and adherence to anti-epidemic measures [29, 30]. These data suggests that different strategies could be successful with groups of different political orientations given differences in the source of hesitancy, necessitating specific approaches to audience segmentation and targeting.

Sociological studies on risk communication during the COVID pandemic have shown that, in parallel with the presence of governance figures, the inclusion of experts as individuals in communication with the public is crucial for the acceptance of social isolation, but remains irrelevant with regard to socially less severe counter-epidemic measures [31]. Involvement of experts brings significant benefits for timely prevention especially in the initial stage of spread of infectious pathogens when political mobilization is delayed [32]. Collaboration between public health and policy makers is largely shaped by the policy positions of the government. During the COVID pandemic, government support for health promotion was determined by the attitudes of those in power [22]. Political will and the ability to provide social and economic support to the population, as resorted to by European leaders [33], as well as the provision of resources for health care and research [7], have a direct role in dealing with the emergency. Political willingness to support the community is part of the communication signals to the public with different support tools having different weight given cultural understandings in different countries. The effectiveness of an overall communication strategy in the context of an epidemic emergency is seen as the result of two elements: political advocacy for the need for funding and measures, and evidence-based risk communication [22].

Observations and analyses on the conduct

of vaccination campaigns on the occasion of COVID-19 have found that, in an emergency setting, communication on the topic of COVID vaccines has undergone some transformation over time [14]. Given the aims of their study on the implications of the change in vaccination policy, Vernon-Wilson and her colleagues found three key moments in the vaccination campaign in terms of justifying the need for vaccine uptake: to protect vulnerable groups (1), to achieve collective immunity (2), and following the emergence of scientific evidence on the perishable nature of immunity (3) [14]. In the pandemic setting, the COVID-19 vaccination campaign emphasized the need for collective vaccine uptake to achieve collective immunity and presented immunoprophylaxis as a condition for a return to "normal" [34, 35].

Practices in action - in search of the unifying element

Voluntary prevention is essential to avoid simulation of compliance, which only masks the risk of virus spread. In this sense, tools other than fear of punishment must be sought. A retrospective study conducted in Japan demonstrates that a large proportion of people behaved responsibly by cancelling trips and gatherings at the onset of the pandemic, even before the state of emergency was declared in the country [36]. Their behaviour was most likely influenced by the WHO statements and the Japanese authorities' decision to close schools and was not a product of obligation. The data collected by the researchers show that recommendations from the government are most highly valued in shaping behavior, followed by each individual's own perceptions [36]. Of course, one must keep in mind that subjective worldviews are a product of variables such as age, residence, gender, political persuasion, and others.

Government-supported public services are a reliable communication channel to reach the population. According to Betsch and her colleagues, countries need communication tools that meet 5 basic criteria - be evidence-based (1), offer rapid (2) and periodic relevance (3), be simple and with the option to adapt to changing situations (4), and come at a low cost (5) [37]. An analysis of information flow regarding the COVID pandemic in the United States indicates that despite the few reports of the benefits of protective mask use, the public sector covered the essential

components of disease prevention [38]. The study team noted the benefits of engaging individuals from the administration who enjoy high levels of trust among the population. Despite implementing the good practice, an opportunity for scientific justification of the recommendations made was still missed [38].

Similarly, institutions could also directly influence external information content, as the use of press releases is a common journalistic practice especially in the health sector. Press releases provide controlled access to information delivered in the way the communicator wants [39]. Press releases allow government entities to maintain their role as the main primary source of information in the media. According to various studies, representatives of state institutions are used as sources in newsrooms in between 75 and 89.1% of the examples included in the studies [14, 18, 19, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45]. Another study published data from the United States concluding that, at least in state-specific social science, government representatives are among the most trusted sources of information [46].

Another example of success in conducting risk communication by crisis managers to the public is the use of social media as a means to reach audiences and in particular to rebuild lost trust through the possibility of two-way information exchange [47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64]. Research in this direction has shown that maintaining institutional accounts has mainly 3 objectives: increasing the transparency of activities of public importance, encouraging citizen participation, and developing collaboration at different levels [65, 66, 67]. The possibility of using hashtags facilitates interaction with the audience and stimulates participation in the communication process by the audience [68]. One of the studies reviewed highlights as a recommendation that institutional interaction with the public via social media should be done through text messages, which during the pandemic reported greater user engagement as opposed to those accompanied by photos or videos [53]. These observations reported by different research teams [49, 53, 69] are surprising given the multimedia communication environment and the principles of easier content uptake in this type of information

channels, which according to other research remain valid in non-crisis periods [52, 70, 71, 72, 73].

Despite the reported benefits of text messages, practice shows that in some cases, such as in Canada, for example, social media content replicated messages from official institutional websites by making institutional accounts formal [74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80]. Other negative practices are the delay in information submission due to the continuous activity of other communicators, and the failure of institutions to contact citizens directly [51, 81].

During the pandemic, however, some leaders used social media not just as a channel to reach citizens, but also as a tool to reinforce a sense of belonging and cohesion among individuals. Jacinda Ardern, who was the acting Prime Minister of New Zealand during the pandemic, engaged the public in a dialogue about the crisis through podcasts and live-streaming positions via the Facebook platform [82]. Seeking contact with the public from her position as a leader is an approach with proven benefit given the build-up of nervous anticipation in the public space [83]. In this case, Prime Minister Ardern's presence had a therapeutic effect in the context of a turbulent situation and helped her maintain her credibility [84]. A similar strategy was generally pursued by political leaders present in social media, with a gradual softening in the tone of infection alerts (with a peak of 62% of all government Tweeter posts by early March 2020). In early May, the reassuring tone permanently prevailed [57]. While Rao's team found that government entities were much more careful with alarmist messages in contrast to non-government Tweeter accounts, which even as of May 2020 had a lower percentage of reassuring messages [57], Xie and his colleagues concluded that positive messages from institutions and citizens on another social platform, Weibo, predominated [58]. In economics, there was no statistically significant difference between stressful messages and reassuring messages [57]. However, one of the studies reviewed provides evidence that negative attitudes towards the pandemic in messages shared by the US President at that time increased interest in the content he shared [26].

Indeed, creating emotional connection with the audience is a factor in communication and determines

the receptivity and subsequent life of a message online. However, neutrality in the style of messages addressed by political leaders to the community was prevalent compared to emotionally charged messages during the pandemic [56]. Research has shown that positive attitudes of the communicator influence his or her social image in a good way and are positively associated with the recipient's willingness to share the information [85, 86, 87]. Studies have reported that in the context of an epidemic situation, with their online behavior (comments, shares, and likes), users value health advice, new information, and accountability from institutions to address the problem as a personal priority [53, 68, 85, 88].

Research of communication conducted by state leaders have shown that the inclusion of a call to concrete action is most often present in public speeches - 86.81% of Australian head of state appearances include such a component [89, 90]. Demonstrating empathy, solidarity and personal commitment are other common elements in communicating with the public. The demonstration of personal commitment to contribute to a positive outcome of the crisis by leaders is seen as a crucial element in gaining public trust. An example is Obama's decision in 2010 to immunize his daughters against swine flu [46]. A well-established approach to creating positive attitudes toward vaccines recommends emphasizing benefits and focusing dialogue with the public on the priority of "being protected" [91].

Various sources point to Ardren's overall management of the health crisis as a success due to her ability to lead people. Her first statement did not discuss specific measures, but the personal responsibility of each individual [89]. That approach materializes the principle of agency in risk communication messages of the CERC (Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication) model [8, 92]. Placing the community at the centre (the 'team of 5 million' concept [93]), her approach was to connect with people's experiences, calm anxiety and urge citizens not to leave their homes to disrupt transmission [89, 93]. Observations have shown that the call to specific action in the face of crisis is the most frequently used instrument by political leaders, with the best results in influencing public behavior reported when combined with intimacy in communication style and sharing details

of the leader's personal life [56]. Ardern used empathy as a tool to increase acceptance of health recommendations and interventions among the public. Her behaviour united on the basis of shared values, an important condition for cooperation from the public [12, 13, 94, 95, 96], and inspired confidence without being conflated with feelings of pity and sympathy, emotions associated with helplessness and inaction [97]. Analysts have also appreciated the benefits of this approach in Poland, where the leitmotif of local government messaging was that the community would face the challenge together [49, 98].

Achieving unity is considered with no alternative for social recovery during crises. Dividing the community even on objective grounds such as health status (risk groups) in the context of a reported risk of infection in public statements is deemed troublesome due to negative connotations of difference and inferiority of the disabled and elderly population [99, 100].

Another useful practice reported in the scientific literature to amplify social trust and social support for measures points to the references to European instruments to deal with the crisis, inserted as an integral part of institutional communication [101]. Lerouge et al. explain the negative correlation between levels of fear in society and information saturation about the activities of European structures with the Union's financial mechanisms to deal with the consequences of the crisis.

Fear as an alternative measure, sanctions and coercion - a radical move of the authorities

"The masses have never thirsted after truth. They turn aside from evidence that is not to their taste, preferring to deify error, if error seduce them. Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master; whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim." - Gustave Le Bon, [102].

The constant maintenance of a certain amount of fear in the masses is an instrument which guarantees the maintenance of order [103]. An analysis of the content and communication discourse of political leaders' Tweeter posts reveals that a significant percentage of their posts have a negative emotional charge - over 21% of all posts made by leaders of the United States, Australia, and Canada [56]. However,

according to the same study, positive messages regarding the state of emergency caused by COVID-19 dominated the content of their accounts, with the highest proportions reported in Singapore and Ireland [56]. Positive communication enhances social cohesion between individuals by mitigating the fear of uncertainty [103]. Despite the benefits of positively charged communication cited in the previous section, and its use during the pandemic, the induction of fear by political leaders is a quick way to induce change in human behavior [104]. The reason for success when using fear as a driver to achieve a specific goal has been linked to perceptions of the magnitude of danger under the influence of emotion [104, 105]. Because of this feature, during epidemic situations, pessimistic forecasts awaken people's instinct for self-preservation and are used more frequently at the onset of the emergency [106], when the unknown is of the greatest magnitude for both the public and political leaders.

However, according to Bavel and his colleagues, when coping mechanisms are not available in human capital, such psychological manipulations trigger a defensive response in the individual who feels helpless [107]. Results from an older study on the theory of behavioral change through fear induction indicated that message persuasiveness increases when stronger fear is induced in the recipient, but the motivational effect depends on the accompanying signal of an effective success mechanism [108, 109]. Despite theories about the inevitability of using fear instrumentation in the service of the public interest, more modern authors associate this approach with immaturity and an inability to effectively lead the public [110]. According to researchers in the field of crisis management, the main role of institutions and state authorities is to balance between warnings of danger and assurance of a successful outcome of an adverse situation [111], while controlling the level of fear in society [112].

A study found that Médecins Sans Frontières' behaviour on Instagram during the Ebola outbreak in Africa was an example of good practice as it combined information about the severity of the situation but also offered an alternative to reduce the impact on the individual [113]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, theorists and practitioners from the fields

of medicine, social sciences, and communications came to a consensus that counteracting to the overwhelming panic in society was no alternative to establishing trust and a two-way exchange of information between governmental structures and society to manage the crisis in the long term [7, 12, 13, 114, 115, 116]. Data on the spike in the number of mental health problems triggered at the onset of the pandemic also confirmed the counterproductive role of fear [117]. However, Sandman argues that in a crisis, fear is a necessary element without which society would neglect the problem. Nevertheless, he elaborates that the presence of fear necessitates a communication style that indicates a direction for coping and eliminates doubt about recovery [118]. Without such support from governing structures, the result of fear-mongering is negatively perceived, as it fuels a sense of panic or leads to denial. Experience shows that uncontrolled fear is unconstructive and threatens established order and social norms [119, 120].

The announcement of a pandemic caused by a previously unknown virus is itself a stressor with researchers finding that an unmet need for information may exacerbate feelings of fear and weightlessness [121, 122, 123, 124]. In this sense, inducing additional fear to stimulate responsible behavior among citizens seems unwarranted and unhealthy. According to Hugelius et al. communication through the media has the task of helping the community to overcome the crisis by substantiated influence in the direction of stress reduction [125].

CONCLUSION

The COVID pandemic reminded policy makers that public health is an interdisciplinary field and requires cross-sectorial cooperation. At the face of a health crisis political leaders, technical experts and scientists, all have their role in responding to the adverse situation. Communication should be evidence-based and a product of careful planning. Prior exchange between all stakeholders is required for coherence and to meet the needs depending on the social climate.

The mission of policy-makers is to provide reassurance and feeling of unity among the citizens they represent. Although fear-mongering might

have a short-term beneficial effect, in the long run, it creates distrust. Therefore, political leaders should not resort to such instruments but use their image to motivate individuals to contribute to public health.

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